

LEOPOLD METHOD

INTELLIGENT, INSIGHTFUL FOOTBALL ANALYSIS



‘The football landscape in Australia is changing and for the better. Never has there been more in-depth discussion and analysis about this great game, and at the forefront has been *Leopold Method*. The team at *Leopold Method* has delivered some of the best analysis of A-League and Socceroos matches consistently since its creation. Not to mention delving into some of Australian football’s forgotten history. I can’t speak more highly enough of the people who work tirelessly at *Leopold Method*. They’re a credit to themselves and football in this country.’

**Mark Rudan, Fox Sports football analyst, Sydney United 58
coach and former professional player**

‘*Leopold Method* is an extraordinary avenue for quality football journalism. It provides something that appeals to the broader base of football followers covering many aspects of the sport from in-depth analysis of games to wonderfully written opinion pieces and historical features. I have been a football writer for 42 years, working for the *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), the *Sydney Morning Herald* and now *The Australian*, where I have been the chief football writer for over 25 years. In that time I have never come across the like of *Leopold Method*. I have no hesitation in recommending them.’

Ray Gatt, Chief football writer, The Australian

‘Australian sport is awash with those covering it seemingly in minute detail. But rarely does the mainstream allow itself the time or inclination to step back and ask why and show how. *Leopold Method* does that, and more. It’s a breath of fresh air for Australian sport, let alone football.’

John Stensholt, Journalist, Australian Financial Review

‘A cultured Australian footballer known as “The Little Professor”, Leo Baumgartner, is the eponymous inspiration for *Leopold Method*. It’s appropriate. Leopold Method not only lives up to its tag line of “intelligent, insightful analysis”, but I would add another – “independent”. Even if the reader doesn’t agree with the analysis presented – and diversity of opinion is part of the DNA of football – *Leopold Method* is a “must read” publication that adds significant value to the Australian football media. Long may it continue.’

**Bonita Mersiades, Guardian Australia, My Football Today
director and advisor to Northern Fury FC**

‘I arrived in Australia at the start of 2013 to set up the sport desk of Australian branch of the *Guardian* newspaper. As a brand we pride ourselves on our football coverage and I was looking for writers and analysts who could carry on that tradition in Australia. The website that stood out for me was *Leopold Method*: it contained strong analysis with respect for the history of football in Australia. It’s where I found Joe Gorman and Kate Cohen, two of the best young football writers in Australia.’

Tom Lutz, Sport Editor, Guardian Australia

‘It has been great to witness the development of the game both on and off the park, particularly over the past decade. We’ve always had talented people in all facets of the game doing great things but unfortunately, more often than not, this went unnoticed. With the explosion of social media and sites such as *Leopold Method*, the platform is well and truly here to assist in improving the knowledge base within our football community. The analysis and insight provided by the crew at *Leopold Method* is top class and continues to make an outstanding contribution to the growth of our great game. The likes of Kate Cohen, Joe Gorman and Shaun Mooney demonstrate a tactically astute and high level understanding of the complexities of the game. Everyone can see what’s happening on the field, *Leopold Method* explains in great detail why.’

**Alistair Edwards, Football analyst, AFC Technical Study Group
panel member and former Socceroo**

‘*Leopold Method* has established itself as an authoritative reference across the breadth of Australian football matters. The content is a function of talented and professional journalists who value thorough research and evidence-based analysis. In *Leopold Method*, we have a resource that has identified the core elements of Australian football’s DNA, thereby enabling it to make an outstanding contribution to the journey and evolution of our game in this new era.’

**Kimon Taliadoros, ABC Radio football commentator
and former Socceroo**

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First published by Leopold Method in 2014
Pemulwuy, NSW, 2145
www.leopoldmethod.com.au

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ISBN 978-1-921134-42-5 (print)
ISBN 978-1-921134-47-0 (digital)

Image credits: page 4 courtesy Laurie Schwab collection, Deakin University; page 22 courtesy Joe Gorman; page 38 courtesy Anthony Theuma; page 54 courtesy Getty Images; page page 70 courtesy Anthony Stipo, Area News; pages 88 and 94 courtesy Picture Ipswich, Fassifern Historical Society; page 90 Aboriginal domestic scene from Blandowski's *Australien in 142 Photographischen Abbildungen*, 1857 Murray/Darling expedition, by Gustav Mützel; page 108 courtesy Pete Nowakowski

Cataloguing-in-Publication data is available from the National Library of Australia

Editorial, subscription and advertising enquiries: shaun@leopoldmethod.com.au

Cover illustration by Jamie Osborne
Cover design and typesetting by Xou Creative, www.xou.com.au
Printed in Australia by Griffin Press

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EDITORIAL

LEOPOLD METHOD BEGAN IN DECEMBER 2012 AS AN AGGREGATION of bloggers looking for a readership and a space to tell new football stories. It owes its existence and any initial success to email trails, likes on Facebook and shares on Twitter and LinkedIn. Unlike in print publishing, there are few barriers to entry in online journalism. A WordPress account, a few writers willing to work for free or very little and a passion for the task at hand is all that is required. Ironically, the *Leopold Method* quarterly edition is both a product of and a reaction against this phenomenon. It is a print publication conceived by the anarchy of the internet.

Within three months of the website launch, *Leopold Method* was nominated by readers as one of three websites of the year for the 2013 Football Fans Down Under Awards, alongside SBS's The World Game and Fox Sports. It was at that awards night in Sydney that most of the contributors met each other for the first time. Welcome to the online newsroom. A year later, *Leopold Method* was nominated for the same category again.

The response from readers to *Leopold Method* has been nothing short of remarkable, and it has exceeded our wildest expectations. Now is the time, we feel, to turn that goodwill into something bigger, better and more sustainable.

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Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the allure of print is still strong. In the State Library of New South Wales, there are bound copies of an old newspaper called *Soccer World*. Whilst it is a product of a different era of news and publishing, *Soccer World* remains a salutary example of sports journalism in Australia. Importantly for researchers and historians, its value is as a document of record. You can pick it up, you can hold it, and if you have the time and the interest, you can flick through and read it, uncovering forgotten but important stories in the fading green newsprint.

Under the editorship of a Hungarian émigré, Andrew Dettre, *Soccer World* treated the local game with respect and care. Detail was valued. The issues in football were met head on in beautifully written, fiercely independent editorials and feature articles. Unpopular causes were backed, and new ideas were hatched.

Leopold Method will not be a reincarnation of *Soccer World*. The game has changed, the market has changed and the medium has changed. We cannot hope to replicate the scale of the project embarked upon by Dettre, Lou Gautier and their hard-working team of contributors. But their values and their commitment will continue to form the direction of *Leopold Method*. The desire to create something that has value for the future underpins the decision to shift from online to print, and while we hope for a viable market, we enter this project with a determination to add something of value to the game.

Leopold Method takes its name from Leopold Baumgartner, an Austrian migrant who came to Australia in 1958 to play for Prague in Sydney. He played for several clubs and coached thousands of junior players and made a new life here. Indeed Baumgartner put in much more than he ever got out of football in Australia. In November 2013, he passed away on the North Coast of New South Wales, and the cover of this edition is dedicated to his memory. We are proud that he was alerted to the website before his passing, and

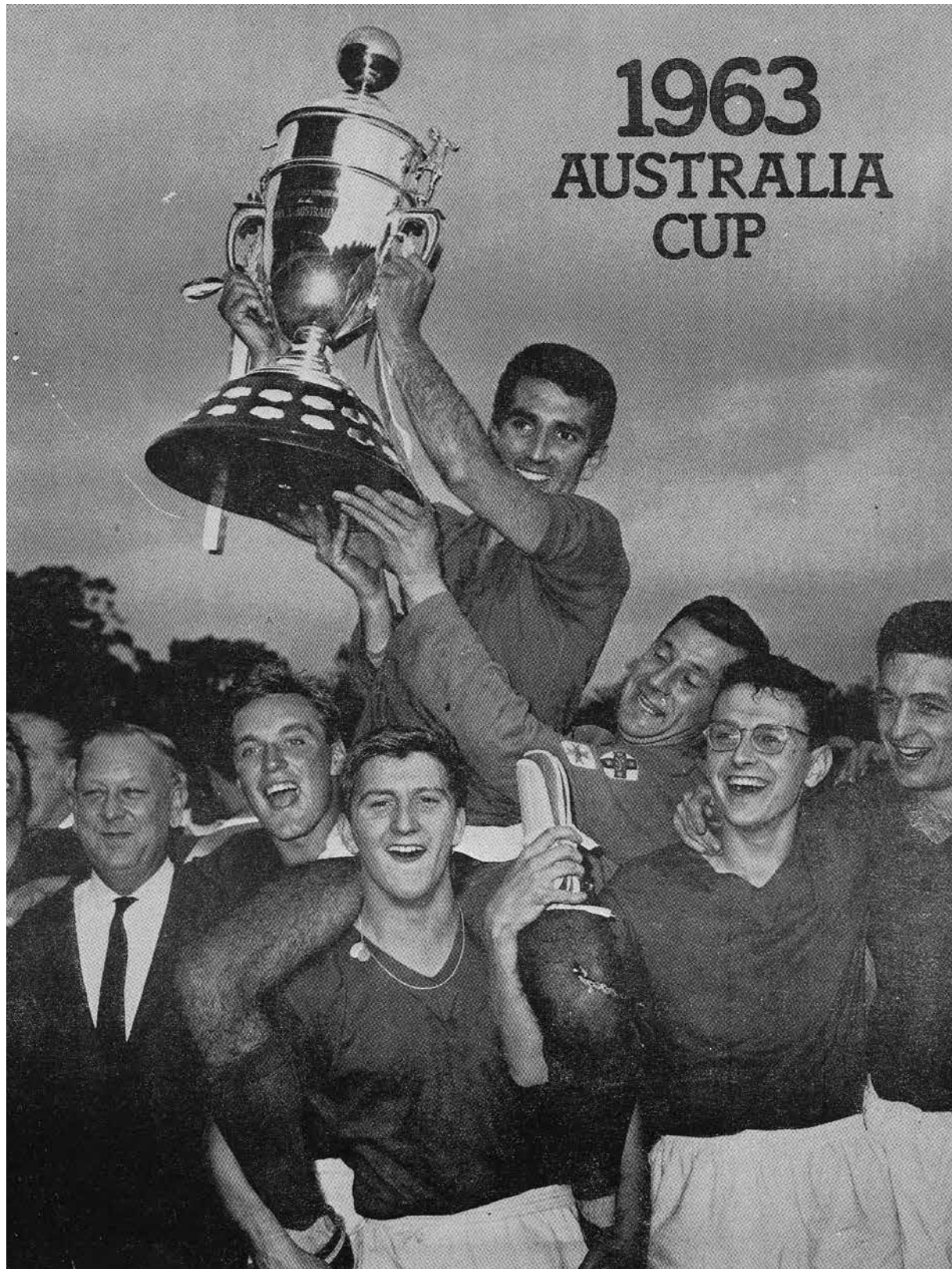
that a relationship has since been built between *Leopold Method* and the Baumgartner family.

The first true ‘marquee’ player to Australia, Baumgartner was special for his dedication to raising the standard of the game in his new country and his passion for junior development. These are guiding principles of *Leopold Method*, and we encourage submissions accordingly. We are proud that many of the founding contributors to the website have progressed in their careers in football – either in journalism or in coaching – and we hope to continue to uncover new writers.

Media coverage of football in Australia is growing, but it is lacking in depth and variety. There are not enough full time football journalists and not enough outlets, and as a result there are too many journalists forced to chase fire engines and not enough who are given the space to ask who or what started the fire. We will provide a place for those stories that get squeezed out of the daily news cycle, and a space for issues to be addressed with the care and nuance they deserve.

We hope for a proud, independent and coherent football culture in Australia. We see the migrant influence on the Australian game as overwhelmingly beneficial. Dettre and Baumgartner are just two examples, but there are countless others whose contributions should never be disregarded or forgotten. In this edition you will find the story of Sam Vella, a proud Maltese man who used football as a way of giving back to his community. At *Leopold Method* we see the A-League as just one of many aspects of Australian football worthy of reportage and analysis. We see the current boom as an opportunity to learn and understand Australia’s rich football history, and to redistribute back to the grassroots.

1963 AUSTRALIA CUP



AUSTRALIA AND ITS CUPS: THEN AND NOW

ROY HAY

AN AUSTRALIAN TRADITION

IN 1962 THE FLEDGLING AUSTRALIAN SOCCER FEDERATION embarked on an experiment. Led by its first President Henry Seamonds, it started a knock-out cup competition involving teams from several of the Australian states. It ran for seven seasons at a time when the game in Australia was fragmented into state competitions and the football bodies came together only when the states played carnivals or a national team had to be selected to play against overseas opposition. That Australia Cup competition was a first step in the game becoming a national and an international sport of some significance.

Today a new experiment is under way as the Football Federation Australia Cup reaches the concluding stages of its first iteration. The modern competition may stimulate as much change in the game as its predecessor by raising the standard and the aspirations of clubs and their players and supporters throughout the land. Apart from its potential success as a unique competition, it may be a powerful contributor to the FFA being able to achieve their long-term goals of a second division, promotion and relegation, and a broader base

of the pyramid from which future generations of Australian players may be drawn. The idea need not be restricted to males either.

Though the FFA and many others see the new Australia Cup as leveraging off the mystique of the FA Cup in England, this is a uniquely Australian competition with its own format, organisation, potential and magic. It has to take account not only of distance, but different histories and traditions and expectations. That is something not to be feared or denigrated but welcomed. Already each club taking part is giving its own special meaning to the competition. It also helps fill a huge gap in the Australian football program. The A-League's off-season is so protracted that clubs and players spend almost as much time not playing as they do on the pitch.

Cup competitions have a special place in the history of Association football. The Football Association (FA) Cup began in England in 1872 only nine years after the FA drew up its first set of rules for the game. Playing in the Cup meant adopting those rules and so this was one of the first steps towards spreading a common code around the country. That was strongly reinforced in 1888 when league competition began, but the Cup retained its mystique largely because it is open to all member clubs in England to this day. A myriad qualifying rounds weed out most of the grassroots clubs, but a few survive to take on the big boys in the later rounds and upsets have been common throughout the history of the Cup. Each round produces definitive results and if the winner is one of the outsiders it is virtually guaranteed a civic reception on return home.

Here in Australia, cup competition began even earlier than in England. The Caledonian Society of Melbourne presented a trophy for what became Melbourne and later Australian Rules football to be contested at its Boxing Day games in 1861. Like the FA Cup in its early years, the Caledonian Cup was a challenge cup. The first team to win it held the cup until it was challenged and beaten by an opponent. It was only in 1874, the third iteration of the FA Cup in England, that it became a true knock-out competition when the holder, Wanderers, joined in the early rounds.

By the 1880s, several Association football knock-out cup competitions were established. The George & George and Beaney cups in Melbourne, the Rainford and Gardiner cups in Sydney, the Atkinson Price Trophy in Joadja in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, which still survives today, and several more around the country in the following decades. All these trophies remained local, state-wide at most, reflecting the way the game remained primarily an amateur participation sport, though crowds could be attracted for matches between players of English and Scottish heritage, for example. Six thousand attended the Melbourne encounter in 1911. Two years earlier, Harry Dockerty presented a trophy for a knock-out competition in Victoria and, after a couple of relatively brief hiatuses, it is still being played for today. In 2012-2013 Football Federation Victoria had the idea of turning the Dockerty Cup into a national knock-out competition combining the cachet of a long Victorian history with an ambitious grab at national recognition, but its plans were overtaken by those of FFA.

THE AUSTRALIA CUP: 1962-1968

Though a body with aspirations to control the code throughout Australia was set up in 1911, the game remained resolutely focused on the clubs and the states. The only time they came together was when a national team had to be selected to go on tour or to play against visitors from overseas, or when the states played a carnival, on occasion for the trophy presented by the FA in 1925 when the first English professional team came to this country. Aimed at replicating the Sheffield Shield in cricket, the idea of regular interstate competition never quite happened as local concerns continued to dominate.

In the years after the Second World War the Ampol petroleum company sponsored a series of state cups which were played as pre-season tournaments and often under floodlights. These were generally very successful and resulted in a play-off competition in

March 1960 for the winners of the Ampol cups in the four eastern states. On that occasion JUST from Victoria came out on top after a round-robin involving Hellenic from Queensland, Juventus from South Australia and Wallsend from Newcastle, which had earlier knocked-out the Sydney favourites, Budapest, in a pre-tournament play-off. The series, which took place in Sydney, was not well attended as a result of Budapest's elimination and it showed that the focus on state activities would take some effort to overcome. There was no interstate champions team cup played in 1961.

In 1962 the newly formed Australian Soccer Federation was just emerging from the most protracted and damaging split in the history of Association football in this country. For five years there had been civil war between groups who aspired to run the game. The fall out from the battles was still continuing, and Australia's membership of the governing body of football, FIFA, was still suspended. Clubs in Australia had been gaily signing star players from Europe and pretending that these were just migrants to this country who wanted a recreational game on arrival. Their clubs in Austria, Holland and Malta were not fooled and sought transfer compensation fees. FIFA, which was under pressure from other breakaway regimes, such as Colombia, supported their case and suspended the Australian Soccer Football Association's membership. Incidentally, Australia had only joined FIFA in its own right in 1956 in time to host the Olympic Games football competition in Melbourne.

The split had come about after Hakoah, founded in 1939 and thus one of the relatively older of the new migrant-backed clubs in Sydney, had been refused promotion to the first division of the local competition after winning the second division in 1956. Promotion and relegation was not automatic in Australia, as it was in many countries by the 1950s. An earlier crisis had been averted when two other migrant clubs, Prague and Austral, were given places in the first division by simply extending the league from 10 to 12 clubs in 1955. What began as an attempt to wrest control of the Sydney competition on behalf of the clubs that believed that they

were generating the interest and income for the game, gradually spread across the country.

Often portrayed as a struggle between the new European migrants and their clubs and the old guard of amateur football administrators, many from a previous generation of British and Scottish migrants, in reality it was more complex than that. The bitterness of the conflict, which spilled over into the courts in Victoria, took time to subside and eventually contributed to the death in 1963 of Dr Henry Seamonds, the president of the ASF, the man who championed the Australia Cup.

In 1962 the newly formed Australian Soccer Federation instituted the Australia Cup as a national knock-out competition. Dr Henry Seamonds, while president of the New South Wales Federation of Soccer Clubs first put forward the plan in 1961, but it did not proceed that year, some said because of Victorian opposition. Initially, the competition was confined to New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australian clubs and the draw included 16 teams – four each from Victoria and the Sydney competition in New South Wales, three from South Australia and Queensland, and two from Northern New South Wales.

The Sydney leagues were represented by Yugal, Hakoah, Budapest and APIA, Northern New South Wales by Awaba and Adamstown, Victoria by Wilhelmina, South Melbourne Hellas, JUST and Juventus, Queensland by Oxley, Hellenic and Azzurri, and South Australia by Juventus, Croatia and Budapest. All four Sydney sides got through to the quarter-finals, and Budapest and Yugal defeated Juventus from Melbourne and Juventus from Adelaide in the semi-finals. In 1962 the dominance of the Sydney sides that had been challenged by JUST in 1960 was re-asserted as Yugal hammered Budapest 8-1 at Wentworth Park in the final. Thereafter the victories were shared fairly evenly between New South Wales and Victoria.

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Two Melbourne clubs contested the final in 1963. After a scoreless draw at Olympic Park, Slavia beat Polonia 3-2 in a replay at the same ground. Des Palmer scored a hat-trick for the winners. Tasmania had four teams taking part that year – Olympia, Juventus, Ulverstone and Rangers. The big Sydney and Melbourne clubs came in at the second round, and Olympia from Hobart bowed out at the quarter-final stage against Adelaide Juventus. In the semi-finals Polonia beat Prague from Sydney 3-1 and Slavia accounted for Juventus 2-0.

Melbourne's George Cross was the winner in 1964 after downing APIA from Sydney by 3-2 in front of an estimated 15,000 at Olympic Park, a rare big crowd for an Australia Cup match. Archie Campbell scored the winner in extra-time. The Georgies' line-up included Norm Hobson, John McDaid, Bobby Adams, Tom McPherson, John Brown, Archie Campbell, David Goldie, Don Hodgson, Hans Petersen and Billy Copeland.

Hakoah from Sydney beat APIA in 1965 in a memorable two-legged final. The first final was drawn 1-1 and went to extra time and penalties. In those days penalties were taken in groups of five. After each side took fifteen penalties, the scores were still level. Peter Fuzes, then in his first season with Hakoah as an 18 year old goalkeeper, spoke to *Leopold Method* about the shoot-out. 'We went first. Jimmy Christie missed. Their first kicker was Johnny Wong. He was a star from Malaysia who played with Polonia and then APIA. I had an idea that he would hit the ball about waist level and I showed him his favourite side. He did, but the ball took the outside of the post'.

The next set of penalties went 5-5. 'In the third set, Ian Hillsdon missed,' said Fuzes. The APIA keeper was Audato Iglesias, who had played with Real Madrid and later represented Australia. 'He took the second last penalty kick, and I got a hand to it,' Fuzes explained. 'It was thirteen all and getting very dark at Wentworth Park, so the decision was finally made to have a replay. We had to

come back on the Wednesday and this time we won by 2-1.' *Soccer World* reported:

During these proceedings the pitch resembled some sort of a picnic ground. At one end a bunch of players, One NSW Federation official and the referee argued vehemently for and against the continuation of the penalty kicks. At the other end the wife and two children of a player walked casually around the ground, looking for "daddy". Finally it was announced that the match would be replayed on Wednesday. Although the rules of the Australia Cup state clearly enough that the penalties must continue until there is a decision, the ASF was still wise in ordering a replay. Still, many fans must have felt that the running about of some officials, the pushing, shoving and arguing on the field in between the three series of penalties was not the most dignified way of organising things.

Lou Gautier from *Soccer World* was not impressed by St George Budapest's win over Croatia from the ACT in a quarter-final in 1966. 'The match was one long yawn, but it was a pity that it took a procession of crude fouls to relieve the monotony of an insipid match more in keeping with village football than the Australia Cup.' They don't write match reports like that now. South Melbourne Hellas and Melbourne Hungaria reached the semi-finals but lost to Hakoah and APIA from Sydney respectively. APIA finally claimed the title in 1966 beating Hakoah 2-0 in the final.

The Hungarians from the Melbourne club upset APIA by 4-3 after extra-time in the final in 1967. In front of a crowd of 11,185, Atti Abonyi, who was to play with the Socceroos for a decade including the World Cup in Germany in 1974, scored a memorable hat-trick in the final. Coached by Irish international Bill Walsh, the 1967 Hungaria team which played in the final was Henry Surma, Tom Fowler, Tony Gregal, Bob Connolly, Alistair Scott, Ian Shanks,

Frank McCann, Atti Abonyi, Frank Stoffels, Gerrard Genouille, Col Myers, with Peter Kurta coming on as a half-time substitute. In what proved to be the final year of Australia Cup competition in 1968 the Hakoah clubs of Melbourne and Sydney won through to the final, with the Sydneysiders triumphing by 6-1 over the two legs.

The prize money for the first competition was £5,000, claimed to be the richest football prize in the country. In the *Victorian Soccer News*, Fred Villiers wrote that the first competition was so successful the New South Wales rugby league administration had stolen the idea to promote their game. Yet the Australia Cup never proved to be a financial success. Supporters were much more interested in their domestic league competitions and visits by overseas touring sides than in interstate club competitions. If there was no local team in the grand final, the theatre-goers stayed away, and home crowds were seldom sufficient to generate great atmosphere or revenue. By contrast, the 1963 New South Wales first division grand final in Sydney between South Coast and APIA drew 30,158. George Cross and South Melbourne played a league game in front of an estimated 25,000 at Olympic Park on July 1, 1962. In 1966 AS Roma attracted 35,856 to Olympic Park in Melbourne for the first match against Victoria, with many more watching from vantage points outside the stadium.

Meanwhile, the state-based Ampol cups continued drawing big crowds. The Victorian final in early 1963 had 16,437 for the match between Hellas and Polonia. Over 93,000 watched the ten games, more than double the attendance in 1962. The Australia Cup proved that a national cup competition could be staged, but also showed up many of the problems of such a concept. If strictly knock-out from the beginning it risked losing the big draw-cards early, while a seeded draw potentially reduced the attractiveness to smaller teams who might be faced with prohibitive travel costs if they succeeded in getting through early rounds. Tinkering with

the format virtually every year was understandable in what was an experimental phase, but it did not help the fans to get used to the competition or build tradition. 'Every year the rules and regulations of the Australia Cup have been altered,' complained *Soccer World*. 'This unfortunate trend must be stopped if we hope to build the series into a truly significant Australia-wide competition.'

On the other hand, the nation-wide cup competition was an early indication that the focus of the game in the Australia was beginning to shift away from the states to the national and international level. In 1965 Australia set off on attempted qualification for the World Cup for the first time, and just over a decade later the first national league of any of the football codes was established.

THE NSL CUP: 1977 TO 1997

When the National Soccer League was established in 1977, it also had an accompanying cup competition. Restricted for the most part to NSL clubs, though there were exceptions, it began with great expectations. The largest crowd for a final was in 1989-90 when 8790 turned out for the Greek derby between South Melbourne and Sydney Olympic at Olympic Park in Melbourne. However, many of the cup finals attracted fewer than four thousand fans. Much like the NSL itself, the great expectations of the new cup competition were not fulfilled.

The first season of the NSL Cup, however, did provide a gripping conclusion. On 14 October 1977 Brisbane City and Marconi drew 1-1 with Peter Sharne opening the scoring for Marconi late in the first half and Peter Tokesi equalising for the home side on the hour mark. Extra-time could not separate the teams and City eventually won on penalties 5-3. Adelaide City beat St George by the odd goal in five in 1979 before another 8654 fans in Adelaide. Hindmarsh Stadium was the venue for a five-goal thriller in 1986 when Sydney City Hakoah just got home with two minutes left in

extra-time against Adelaide Hellas, but there were only just over 3000 fans at the game. Frank Farina scored twice for Hakoah in the last period of extra-time. The highest score in a final came in 1994-95 when Melbourne Knights trounced Heidelberg United 6-0 at Olympic Park, with a very young Mark Viduka scoring the last two goals. The short-lived Collingwood Warriors (Heidelberg United in disguise) won the Cup in the club's first and only season in the summer of 1996-97, thanks to a single goal by Con Boutsianis against Marconi.

The NSL Cup had limped to an unlamented conclusion. From 1993 onwards the Cup had been played as a pre-season competition apart from in 1995-96 when it was squeezed into a mid-season break. It became a warm-up rather than the culmination of the season and interest waned accordingly.

Paul Williams, the author of *The Un-official Beginners Guide to the History of the Australian National Soccer League*, wrote a prophetic epitaph:

Administrators, clubs and fans must all share the blame over the demise of the national cup competition. The administrators never gave it any sense of purpose, the clubs treated it as little more than friendly/warm-up/trial matches, and the fans reacted accordingly. The format, like that of the league, has been constantly changed. Clubs from outside the NSL have competed, while there have also been occasions when NSL clubs have not competed in the cup. Yet almost everybody involved in soccer wants to see an 'English FA Cup style' knockout competition. If nothing else it would educate the public that there are some very good soccer teams operating outside the national league. The opportunities of the 'smaller' clubs to earn some of the spotlight have been further diminished in recent years with the axing of the (NSW) Waratah Cup and the (Victorian) Dockerty Cup. It is only a matter of time before a major national cup

competition is re-introduced. Everybody wants a national cup, it just seems a matter of giving it the respect it warrants by finding a permanent date and venue for the final. And a generous sponsor, of course ...

FFA CUP INHERITS A HISTORY

In 2003 football in Australia had another major crisis, which rivaled that of the 1950s. The NSL and its clubs were losing money hand over fist, some \$52 million between 2000 and 2003. A series of scandals had trashed the brand. The governing structure of the game was completely dysfunctional. Sponsors were complaining about being ripped off. The fans were voting with their feet, except in the west where Nick Tana's Perth Glory was showing what an inclusive club could achieve with full-scale marketing and promotion and backing. The near misses of 1997 and 2001 seemed to indicate that the Socceroos were destined never to repeat the success of 1973 and qualify for the World Cup.

But help was at hand from a very unlikely source. Seeking to reorient its foreign, cultural and economic policy towards Asia, John Howard's Coalition government came to appreciate that apart from cricket in the Indian sub-continent, the only Australian sport that cut it in Asian countries was football. There was no chance of the federal government investing in the round-ball code in its current state, but the surprise president of the ASF, Ian Knop, his offsider Steve Doszpot, and Rod Kemp, the federal minister for sport, persuaded the prime minister to support a root-and-branch inquiry into the governance of football with a view to rescuing the game from itself. David Crawford, who had conducted a significant report on Australian football and was an expert in dealing with bankrupt organisations, agreed to carry out the task. With Socceroos legend and media personality Johnny Warren at his side, Crawford showed that there was huge latent support for

the game if it could put its house in order. Frank Lowy, head of the Westfield shopping centre empire, who had walked away from the game in 1987 vowing never to return, was summoned to carry through the necessary reforms. He did so with a hand-picked board that had business rather than football experience and \$15 million in government funding to pay off debt and extract the code from sponsorship commitments that had become onerous.

Initially, the focus of the new leadership was in putting the new governance structure in place, seeking to qualify for the World Cup, obtaining entry into the Asian Confederation of FIFA, and setting up a new senior male competition. All of these goals were achieved, though not without some pain. In order to present a new approach to the game, it was inevitable and necessary that the new order had to be presented as strikingly different from what had gone before. Slogans like 'New football, not old soccer' hurt many who had fought for the game and achieved its many successes over the years, and the wounds, as in previous split, are taking time to heal.

Some of the recommended organisational changes also proved problematic. Crawford, the Professional Footballers Association and a group led by Andrew Kemeny were tasked with examining plans for a new national league, and all came down on the side of structural separation of the A-League from FFA. Lowy and his board resisted these suggestions. The A-League required and still requires cross-subsidisation and support from other areas in the game, and a single source of authority – the tribal council if you like – has to make the decisions in respect of the game as a whole. There have been battles between the owners of the now franchised clubs and FFA, resulting in more consultation, but ultimate power still remains with the governing body. Getting the league up and running and pushing it towards viability took precedence over meeting some of the commitments entered into when FFA joined the Asian Confederation. These included at least 12 teams in the

top league and a second division with promotion and relegation. A national cup competition was also something that remained an aspiration.

By 2013 the new regime was firmly established, had a functioning if not yet self-supporting set of clubs in the national league and had presided over participation in three successive World Cup final tournaments. A national cup could now be considered once again. This could be done in a context in which the states and the clubs no longer controlled the agenda and when the mass of Australian football supporters, particularly the young ones, had a national and international vision for the game.

When the Hakoah social club in Bondi was being demolished, someone found a battered trophy in a dumpster outside the premises. It turned out to be the body of the Australia Cup that Hakoah Sydney had won way back in 1968. Initially FFA did not appreciate the significance of the find and ignored requests to house the trophy. Then, in a new mood of self-confident realisation that it could embrace the game's history at last, FFA decided the battered old Australia Cup trophy was a link with the past that was worth preserving and exploiting. With the aid of some photographs of the original trophy, a new one was designed based on the old one. In December 2014 an Australian club captain will be able to raise the Westfield FFA Cup as a tangible link with the past as well as an augur for the future.

Incidentally the link between the old and new cups allowed Hakoah Sydney City to cheekily claim that they were the defending Cup holders when they took on Palm Beach Sharks in the Round of 32 in the new FFA Cup in August 2014. Mind you, someone said they should be expelled from this year's competition for failing to take care of the old trophy! As it was Palm Beach knocked Hakoah out by 2-1.

As has often happened, some of the state bodies, including Victoria, wanted to pre-empt the establishment of a national cup, but FFA insisted that this be done by itself when it was ready and able to do so. It finally managed to square all the interests involved

and secure a three-year sponsorship from the Westfield Group and media coverage by Foxtel so that the competition could kick-off in 2014.

The competition is regionalised to begin with each state and territory running the preliminary rounds. An entry of 631 clubs began the qualification process in 2014 and these were whittled down to 22 made up of seven clubs from New South Wales, four each from Queensland and Victoria, two each from Northern New South Wales and Western Australia, and one each from the ACT, Tasmania and South Australia. The Northern Territory will join in 2015. Places are determined by the number of registered players in each federation, and the draw is rigged so that at least one of the non-A-League clubs reaches the semi-finals. All matches are sudden death, with extra-time and penalties, but no replays.

FFA has already learned a lot from the history of previous cup competitions. The governing body is picking up the tab for reasonable travelling expenses for the away clubs. It is working with the clubs to improve their facilities ahead of hosting games. If a member federation club is drawn against an A-League club then the former hosts the game. Otherwise, the first name out of the pot during the draw becomes the home team.

Brett Emerton is aware of the incentives for players from the grassroots clubs. 'A lot of the young players playing in this competition will hope to showcase themselves in front of the other A-League clubs. Let's hope this competition will help unearth some young talent in Australia,' he said.

But it is probably the exposure of the lower level clubs that will, in the long run, be most significant. As a country we desperately need to extend the league season organically by drawing in at least two more viable clubs. The institution of national premier leagues in all the states, with their own play-off series, is certainly going to assist the top teams in each area to measure themselves against each other and against the criteria for acceptance into an expanded A-League or a national second division. Psychologically a Cup victory over an A-League team in the latter stages of the

Cup may be the X-Factor that catapults an ambitious team into the limelight.

For the existing A-League clubs the FFA Cup provides some competitive games during the long build up to the start of the league. Though they will be expected to win, against lower level opposition, we already have had one upset in the Round of 32, and more may follow.

As with the A-League, the location of the final each year will be decided when the participants are determined, so we will not have a Wembley-style pilgrimage every year as they do in England, at least initially. Down the track this is something that might be considered.

We know from previous experience that tinkering with the format and regulations each year is to be avoided. Certainly, if there are clear improvements to be made that should be done, but it is worthwhile to stick as closely as possible to the existing format to allow players, clubs and their fans, and newcomers to the game, to find their way into its unique ambience. Take it step by step and let the competition build its own distinctive traditions. I remember being in a new hall of residence at the University of Manchester when the student president said with a straight face, 'As of tomorrow it will be a tradition of this place.' A bit sudden, I thought.

Some glitches need to be put right. For example, banning streaming by host clubs of matches not being broadcast by Foxtel is not a good look and needs to be dealt with on a broader basis. Will there be a further incentive for the winning club apart from the prestige associated with winning the domestic cup competition? David Gallop has flagged negotiations with the Asian Football Confederation over possible entry to the Asian Champions League for the winning club.

If the male game can sustain an FFA Cup, how long will it be before Australia's women footballers demand a national knock-out

competition of their own? The W-League clubs are now drawing the cream of the world's talent to play in Australia, including FIFA World Player of the Year, Nadine Angerer, and Jessica Fishlock, the captain of the Welsh national team. Why should they and their Australian team-mates not have a chance to showcase their talent in a national knock-out competition?

Just as the Australian Cup in the 1960s grew out of some very turbulent times in the game and contributed to a fundamental shift in the whole story of the game in this country, so the FFA Cup in the second decade of the twenty-first millennium can be the catalyst for a new round of changes for the better in the world game in Australia, perhaps even in Australia's place in the game around the world.



THE DEL PIERO EFFECT

JOE GORMAN

IT WAS HERALDED AS THE GREATEST COUP IN AUSTRALIAN football history. When Sydney FC signed Alessandro Del Piero in September 2012, they created global headlines. There had been marquee players in the past: Dwight Yorke signed for Sydney FC in their inaugural season, Romario played a few games for Adelaide United in 2006, Robbie Fowler played for North Queensland Fury and Perth Glory. But Del Piero was different. The man who had become almost synonymous with Juventus would continue his career faraway in the Antipodes, in the middle of nowhere. Del Piero and his management called it 'Project Sydney.'

The welcome Del Piero received at Sydney Airport was unprecedented. A Sydney FC scarf was wrapped around his neck, a fluffy toy kangaroo stuffed into his arms. As he shuffled through the gates, signing autographs and smiling at the teeming mass of people, some wearing Juventus gear, others wearing the sky blue of Sydney FC, he told reporters that he was here to win titles. 'I am here not for the end of my career but for the start of my new career,' said Del Piero. 'I want to win some. I play to win.' His new teammate Brett Emerton said he couldn't wait to go to training that week. The *Sydney Morning Herald* printed the back page in pink newsprint and completely in Italian, with the headline *La Gazetta Del Piero*, a tribute to the famous Italian sports daily. Even the famous rugby league writer Roy Masters' article carried an Italian

headline. Overnight, bookmakers slashed the odds of Sydney FC winning the title.

But what followed was less impressive. In Del Piero's first season, Sydney FC finished seventh in a ten team competition. In April 2014, in Del Piero's second season in Australia, Sydney FC were bundled out of the first round of the finals by Melbourne Victory. In two seasons Del Piero played just ninety minutes of finals football, while clubs less star struck and more organised won the silverware. In 2012-13, Sydney's new cross-town rivals, Western Sydney Wanderers, won the premiership in their first season and became the sports story of the year.

The plan to bring Del Piero to Australia was hatched in the mind of a fan. Lou Sticca, one of Australia's leading player agents and a long-time supporter of Juventus, was in Turin for Juventus' last game of the season against Atalanta in May 2012. 'They'd won the league the week before, and so that last game at home was a celebration of them winning their first championship after many years in the doldrums,' Sticca told *Leopold Method*. 'I got hold of Alessandro's brother Stefano, who is his agent. Knowing I was in Turin, I contacted Stefano and said I'd like to catch up and discuss opportunities for Alessandro once he's finished with Juventus.'

On May 11, 2012, a couple of days prior to Juventus' match against Atalanta, Sticca met with Stefano in the foyer of the Principe di Piemonte, the hotel where Juventus have historically lodged. 'I put forward Australia as an option,' explained Sticca. 'To be completely honest with you, he was professional not to laugh at me. He was bemused and surprised, almost bewildered. I walked away from the meeting thinking, well, it's never going to happen. Stefano said they were going to explore all their options, and he didn't think Australia would be something they'd consider.'

However, Sticca was relentless, and he continued to email Stefano regularly. 'Every time I read something in the paper about Del Piero going to the MLS or something, I would write and offer

my opinion and my help,' explained Sticca. 'I started to detect in the replies that perhaps what the media was reporting wasn't really true, and I should keep at this.'

During this time, Tony Pignata, formerly the CEO of Wellington Phoenix, became CEO of Sydney FC. Scott Barlow, the son in law of Sydney FC owner David Traktovenko, became the chairman. After putting Del Piero's name forward to several clubs in the A-League, Sydney FC were the first to jump at the opportunity. 'As the interest level from Turin was increasing, I started to cut Tony [Pignata] in,' Sticca said. 'It got to the point where after a number of telephone and Skype sessions with Stefano and the management team we were told we needed to get on a plane over to Turin. Within a couple of days me and Tony took off to seal the deal.'

In Leichhardt in Sydney's inner west, just off Parramatta Road, there is a small café called Bar Sport. In a street gradually losing its Italian heritage, Bar Sport exquisitely retains its character. The long bar stacked with panini and biscotti, the fire-engine red espresso machine, the marbled floor: this cafe would not look out of place in the streets of Rome or Turin. Owned by Joe Napoliello, the walls are decorated with Sydney FC, Socceroos and Italian club memorabilia. At one end the entire season results of the Serie A are carefully updated in chalk on a large blackboard, and on the opposite wall football is always on the television. Behind the bar are two framed Socceroos shirts from the 2006 World Cup, and between them sits a clock emblazoned with the faces of the successful Italian team. Indeed the colours of all clubs are welcome in Bar Sport, but whenever Juventus play local fans pack out the cafe, and Napoliello trades in his work t-shirt for his Juve jersey. I've seen him drop everything at the espresso machine to run around in the cafe, fists pumping and yelling like a madman after Juve score a goal. Not long after Del Piero signed for the club, someone cheekily etched 'Alex Del Piero, 2012' in wet cement just outside the entrance.

Napoliello grew up watching his local side APIA Leichhardt in the National Soccer League, and has been attending Sydney FC games since 2005. He can remember exactly where he was when Del Piero's signing was announced. 'As news was coming in I was having dinner with my parents,' he told *Leopold Method*. 'I couldn't contain my excitement and social media was abuzz. I don't think my parents had seen me that excited since I was a kid.' According to Napoliello, customers wore their Juventus gear to his cafe for weeks after the announcement.

'My immediate reaction was one of slight disbelief,' Grant Muir, a leader of the Sydney FC supporters group The Cove, told *Leopold Method*. 'It was hard to grasp that such a big name in world football was heading our way for two years. Suitable marquee signings are hard enough to find, but getting Del Piero was like catching lightning in a bottle. Once it was confirmed I found myself very impressed that my club had the ambition and commitment to make this happen.'

The air of goodwill and excitement, however, was punctured in Del Piero's first match against Wellington Phoenix. Away from home, Sydney FC were disjointed and lost 2-0, succumbing to goals on either side of half time. 'Right throughout the negotiations Alessandro and his brother and the management team kept prodding myself and Tony, asking if the team was any good,' said Sticca. 'As it turned out, they were so underdone that it was embarrassing. I'll never forget the look on Alessandro's face after that first game in Wellington. There was no question that the team just wasn't at the right level.'

Del Piero's first home game also resulted in a loss to Newcastle Jets. Yet it was an occasion that live long in the memories of those at the Sydney Football Stadium. Walking my usual route to the stadium from Paddington, across Oxford Street and down towards the eastern side of the stadium, it was clear this was no ordinary fixture. Seemingly everybody had a shirt emblazoned with Del

Piero's name on the back, either recently purchased from the club store, or in the black and white of Juventus and the azure blue of Italy. I smiled at the men who had sat next to my father and I in the stands for the past seven seasons. 'Where did all these people come from?' we joked. The members were perplexed, but happy.

Before kick-off, The Cove unfurled an enormous banner with Del Piero's face, the Sydney skyline and with the words 'Il Pinturicchio: Paint it Blue.' 'The idea came from The Cove tifo crew,' explained Muir. 'For us it was an opportunity to welcome our new marquee player, but also a chance to introduce The Cove to a new audience with no idea about Australian football and show them what we're all about. It helped to counter the sad, clichéd kangaroo nonsense that the FFA doesn't seem to be able to get past.'

Del Piero scored that day in front of over 35,000 fans, a trademark free kick from the area *Gazzetta Dello Sport* labelled 'the Del Piero zone'. But Sydney FC lost 3-2. When Del Piero took a corner, the crowd swarmed in to take photos on their smart phones, but when Terry McFlynn – the club's only remaining foundation player and captain – was substituted, he was jeered by many Sydney FC supporters on the sidelines. He would later forfeit the captaincy to Del Piero and slowly recede into the background. British author Oliver James once labelled Sydney 'the most vacuous of cities,' and their football club lived up to James' prescription of a city struck by 'the affluenza virus.' Sydney FC aimed high, drove for big investment and big returns, but forgot about the product. Money couldn't buy soul.

Signing one of the biggest names in world football brought extra pressure on Sydney FC, and the coach, Ian Crook, was the first casualty. Like McFlynn, Crook had been at the club from day one. Having aggressively courted Central Coast Mariners and former Socceroos coach Graham Arnold in the off season, only to have him get cold feet at the last minute, Crook was thrust into an

unfamiliar role, and one that suddenly carried extra attention and expectation. He resigned just six rounds into the season. 'I love coaching and I love this club but the head coach role is just not for me,' an ashen faced Crook told the press in November 2012. 'I always said that if the role started to affect me personally or my family or my ability to sleep at night I would make a change and that was happening so I wanted to do the right thing by the club.' Crook was always a back-room man. An all-round nice guy, great with juniors, a man who was better suited as an assistant, he wasn't ready for the Del Piero Show.

'Ian blindsided us,' Pignata told *Leopold Method*. 'We'd lost to Melbourne, and basically he resigned the next day. He just felt that he couldn't handle the A-League.' In came Frank Farina, a champion player in the 1980s and 1990s and a former Socceroos coach. At the time, Pignata admitted 'It's not just about coaching. It's about being the face of the club and handling difficult times,' but added that 'Alessandro has not caused any issues with Ian [Crook] or anyone else at the club.' Farina became the club's seventh coach in eight seasons, illustrating the severe instability that had been briefly masked in the excitement of Del Piero's arrival.

'We were rushed a little bit for time,' Pignata told *Leopold Method*. 'Out of the four or five we had on the table – I won't go into the names, but we had some big names overseas – a lot were already in jobs and wouldn't commit just for the one season. Frank was a local candidate, and we just felt that he could come and rattle the cage and get things on track.'

The next casualties, however, were more significant. Out went the football director Gary Cole and sports scientist Craig Duncan. The 'structures in place' that Crook had boasted about in September 2012 were crumbling or destroyed by December. 'Frank [Farina] will be running the football department and the decision was that the role [of football director], regardless who was in it, was surplus to requirements so we've made it redundant,' Pignata told

the press at the time. Looking back, Piganta told *Leopold Method*, ‘some clubs have football directors. We just felt at the time that any decisions from a recruitment point of view would rest with the head coach. Simple as that.’

It wasn’t long before Craig Duncan was spotted in camp with the Western Sydney Wanderers, assisting the head coach and former Sydney FC defender Tony Popovic. In June 2014, Ian Crook joined him as assistant coach at the Wanderers. Back at Sydney FC, Del Piero trained with his own personal assistant, and was granted a private medical room and trainer at Macquarie University.

The change of coach and backroom staff showed all was not well at the club. Before the new board took over, the football department had worked on a strategic plan with outgoing coach, Vitezslav Lavicka, in order to give the club some stability going forward. However, it is understood that months of planning by the football department were effectively thrown out of the window as Scott Barlow became chairman and assumed full control of the club’s direction. Barlow had his mind on short term popularity rather than long term strategy.

The philosophy shifted from putting in place long term plans to making things up on the go. Unsurprisingly, chaos ensued. It is understood that hundreds of thousands of dollars allocated to wages and the football department were cut before the 2012/13 season in an effort to save money. But when Del Piero came on the radar, the money was suddenly back on the table. The decision to sign Del Piero was made quickly and with the briefest of consultation with Crook, right after Nick Carle left for Emirati club Baniyas on a one year loan deal. The rush of activity left the squad lopsided and the recruitment strategy redundant. The club’s plan to reduce the average age of the squad was shelved. Why, for example, would Sydney FC have wasted a foreign spot on Krunoslav Lovrek – a Croatian midfielder who was supposed to play in the No10 role – if Del Piero was in the club’s sights? Who would play at the No6 position now that Carle had left?

The signing of Del Piero was a business decision first and

a football decision second, and once the football strategy was sidelined, Farina was left with the unenviable task of finding solutions to these problems on the run. Jason Culina and Dimitri Petratos both left the club after arguments with management, and the club won less than half of their remaining matches.

Del Piero's first season with Sydney FC was a paradox. While the team's performance left a great deal to be desired, the club was in the headlines more than ever, and the crowds were healthy at an average of 18,637, a 57% increase from the season prior. Sponsors were brought on board, and the big end of town was engaged. Moreover, there was a snowball effect on the rest of the competition. Not long after the club announced Del Piero's signing, Newcastle Jets lured former England international Emile Heskey, while Western Sydney Wanderers reversed their earlier reluctance to chase a marquee player and signed Japanese star Shinji Ono.

'Alessandro's arrival accelerated the Heskey deal, and it did the same thing to the Wanderers,' explained Sticca, giving credit to Pignata for seizing the opportunity. 'There is no doubt that Sydney's capture of Alessandro changed the landscape and changed the future of the A-League at that point in time.' Indeed the league went from having zero high profile marquee players to three in the space of a month. Del Piero, Ono and Heskey all stayed for two seasons, driving interest and investment in the game. But only Western Sydney Wanderers could truly say their marquee player was as effective on the field as he was off it. Where Sydney FC became a one-man show, Ono wasn't guaranteed a spot in the starting eleven. He slotted into the Wanderers as part of the overall squad.

When Sydney FC played away from home, they were perfect guests. Crowds would flock to see Del Piero, driving revenue for the home team. Del Piero would delight the crowd with a few feints, some twists and turns, and maybe even score a couple, but Sydney FC would more often than not lose the game. Fans around the

country clamoured to see Del Piero. The match between Sydney FC and Adelaide United in Adelaide on New Years Eve in was a case in point. Adelaide has a sizeable Italian community and is a hotbed of Juventus fans, but the game was anti-climactic as Del Piero pulled out with an injury and didn't travel with the squad. 'Look, I know that Adelaide had gone out and publicised Alessandro, but at the time Alessandro was a Sydney FC player,' Piganta told *Leopold Method*. 'His welfare is in our interest. He's not really a circus.' The timing of his injury meant he stayed at home in Sydney, where he tweeted about how wonderful the fireworks were over Sydney harbour.

When he finally took the field in Adelaide almost a year later, a section of the crowd held a huge black, white and gold banner reading 'Welcome to Adelaide, El Capitano.' 'In every stadium I was applauded, in every city the Australian public showed its appreciation and its eagerness to see me on the field,' wrote Del Piero in his autobiography, *Playing On: My Life On and Off the Field*. 'Lots of people, especially but not only Italian migrants, have thanked me for making this choice.' Indeed Sydney FC drove attendances, television viewership and interest around the country. Sydney FC's marquee player was their gift to the rest of the competition, but he made himself available only under his own terms.

By Del Piero's second season in 2013-14, football fans in Sydney had grown wiser, and come to expect less. He was brilliant, but his legs were getting older and the team around him remained dysfunctional. There were reports of disunity within the playing group and amongst staff. Sydney FC went back to their being that nuisance of a club that kept making lots of noise without delivering. The Sydney sports market, of course, is incredibly crowded and notoriously difficult for new entrants, and Sydney FC are not the first team to prioritise 'bling' over structure.

Where he could, Del Piero made himself available to fans after

training sessions, signing autographs, chatting with them and smiling for their photographs. 'Anything we did from a community point of view that was at the training ground, he had no problems,' explained Pignata. 'He would always be there, and he would have no problems staying hours after training signing autographs, and the crowds were enormous some days.' He loved the fans, and they loved him back. But Sydney were in thrall of celebrity. As Muir lamented, "pass it to Ale" wasn't a realistic plan for a successful season.' On the other side of town, the Wanderers were drawing fans to a club. Sydney FC were trying to draw fans to an individual, and that individual was more concerned with his own brand than that of the club.

Perhaps this was best illustrated in the winter of 2013. Sydney FC spent their pre-season traipsing around Italy, with Scott Barlow boasting about enhancing their 'brand recognition' in Europe. 'The camp was maybe a week too long,' said Pignata in September 2014. 'It was three weeks, maybe fourteen days might have been better.' When Sydney FC visited St George for a pre-season game, the state league side sold tickets on the basis Del Piero would be playing. Over 6000 fans turned up in one of Sydney FC's largest and most important catchment areas, but Del Piero wasn't playing, nor was he even at the game. Asked where the star marquee player was, Pignata replied 'I don't know. I was hoping he'd be there that day.' Sydney FC didn't take Del Piero to the suburbs and to the people. Fans were expected to come to them.

From the fans to the sponsors, people were often left in the lurch by Del Piero's management. He was approached to be an ambassador for the Special Olympics, which his management turned down. A-League sponsor Hyundai gave his management vehicles, but Del Piero wouldn't attend their motor show.

'I don't think the Del Piero camp made life easy for the management of Sydney FC,' said Sticca. 'Let's be brutally honest: when we sold the concept of coming to Sydney and Australia and

the A-League to the Del Piero camp we emphasised with great detail that to be a marquee in a country like Australia it would require a lot of off the field work.

‘They agreed to it, but the issue was a general lack of understanding, perhaps on all parts. Guys that play with Juventus don’t do off field work. To get them to do a tweet is a huge effort. The reality is that while Alessandro and his management said “of course we’ll help Sydney”, perhaps what they thought and what was a reality for the club. We were from two worlds, so far apart, that even meeting in the middle was a struggle. Should Sydney FC have capitalised a lot better? Absolutely. But the Del Piero camp just wouldn’t be a party to a lot of the things the club requested.’

Pignata agrees. ‘A lot was the cultural thing and the expectation. We probably wanted him to do a lot more of the corporate stuff. The first few months were difficult to suss out, but once we set the boundaries we came to a compromise. We need him to attend our season launches, we need to do some corporate events, but you would never get him to come to a one off sponsor event. It took a few months to sort all that out.’

‘A lot of Italians feel that he didn’t connect with the Italian community here,’ concedes Napoliello. Marina Freri, a journalist who covered Del Piero’s time in Australia for SBS and the Turin newspaper *La Stampa*, spoke to *Leopold Method* about Del Piero’s impact on the local Italian community. ‘There was excitement among the youngsters, and almost disbelief among the elders that one of the greats of Italian football was about to become a household name in Australia and proudly wear a local jersey,’ said Freri. ‘For some, his arrival validated their own experience: here’s an Italian man who is bringing his skills to the other side of the world, at a time when Italy is going through one of its harshest recessions.’

‘Speaking in our native language, he told me he was happy to be reunited with many of his Italian fans who had longed to see him playing. I think many took his words literally, if not personally. Perhaps he didn’t reserve a special treatment to the

broader community, but if we were in Italy, would he have acted differently? In his biography, he tells of a time at Venice carnival when he was happy to wear a mask the whole day so that he could have a good time with his family.'

In the second season with Del Piero, the style of Sydney's play suffered, as quick passing possession football and high pressing became difficult to implement with an ageing striker. It is understood that Farina didn't want to re-sign Del Piero, and when pressed, Pignata admitted that Farina had 'raised questions' over the issue. 'At the end of the day I've got to leave it up to the owners to pay the money, but the whole board were settled on signing him for another year,' said Pignata. Just months after Farina was supposedly given the role of recruiting players and taking over from the football department, this process raises questions over the strategy. Whose decision was it to re-sign Del Piero? Farina's or the board's?

Nick Carle, who had returned from his loan spell in the Middle East, was ostracised after post-game remarks about being played out of position. The fans grew frustrated and angry. The Cove – who had always maintained a healthy relationship with the club – protested en masse at a home game in February. Pressure piled on Farina, but while the fans called for his sacking, they held a larger banner requesting the removal of the board, in particular Barlow and Pignata. Everybody could see there were deeper issues facing the club.

The fans forum held in February to facilitate discussion between the season ticket holders and the Sydney FC board did little to calm the waters. Pignata admitted that Del Piero's management was 'difficult to deal with' after questions about whether the club was wasting their marquee star. The confusion didn't help the perception that people weren't on the same page, and the club was stumbling from one idea to the next. Del Piero was supposed to be a harbinger for bigger and better things for Sydney FC. Instead,

they were in a familiar spot of having to convince their fans and the media that they knew what they were doing.

Del Piero's last game for Sydney FC, a 2-1 loss against Melbourne Victory in the elimination final, was unremarkable. He signed off for the club in late April. 'It hasn't been an easy choice, also because my life on and off the pitch has been fantastic, my family and I have really enjoyed these two wonderful years,' he wrote on his website. 'Australia will remain in our hearts forever.' Brisbane Roar went on to beat Western Sydney Wanderers in the Grand Final in dramatic circumstances, and football fans turned their attention to the World Cup in Brazil.

For Napoliello, the opportunity to watch Del Piero play was memorable. 'One of the good things to come out of Del Piero's Sydney FC stint is that it finally got Juve fans together to start Juventus clubs in Australia,' Napoliello explained. 'Our club "Juve Club Doc NSW" was actually dedicated to him and bears his name in our official name. We did personally approach him to attend and inaugurate our club but he declined, he did however send us a message of support.'

It is fitting, then, that Del Piero's last game in Australia was for the All Stars against Juventus. The year before, Del Piero, Ono and Heskey had all pulled out of the All Stars game against Manchester United, leading to FFA changing the contracts to force players into participating. It is understood that Del Piero received a match appearance fee of \$300,000, and he was given the captain's armband. Much of the pre-game chatter revolved around Del Piero and his contribution to Australian football. His presence has without doubt been an enormous boost for the league, but to many, the commentary bordered on sycophantic. The All Stars put in a good performance, Del Piero was given a standing ovation, and once again it was time to say goodbye.

The Del Piero effect, of course, is about far more than simply performance and titles. But the failure of Sydney FC to leverage his signing into on-field success raises questions about his legacy. Do Australians love football more? No. Are those who came solely to see Del Piero play likely to remain loyal to Sydney FC? Pignata believes so. He told *Leopold Method* that ‘probably 80%’ of members who signed up after Del Piero signed have maintained their memberships.

For the league, perhaps a new sense of ambition has arisen in the type of marquee players clubs will approach, and for many, Del Piero has been a game-changer. Sydney FC’s brand has certainly been raised, while shirt sales and sponsorships have helped boost revenue. The familiar talk of long-term planning returned. Sites have been scoured in Sydney for a new player academy. Former FFA technical director Han Berger has been appointed to advise the board, Kelly Cross has been appointed to oversee the new academy and the board continues to promise big things for the future. ‘The aim of this club is to qualify for Asia every season,’ said Pignata. ‘And if you do that, you’ve got to be in the top two or three. I think if you do that, the fans are going to stay.’

Sydney FC finally secured the services of Graham Arnold, two years after they tried so hard to lure him from Central Coast Mariners. Austrian national team captain Marc Janko has been signed as their marquee player, and his presence provides an interesting counterpoint to Del Piero. He’s not a household name, but at 31 he is still young and ambitious, and he was signed after extensive scouting by Arnold. He was here for pre-season and for FFA Cup games, and is very much a cog in the machine of Arnold’s squad. He comes to the club in vastly different circumstances than Del Piero’s arrival.

‘We spent some good money on Alessandro, so we said to Graham: “you have a budget for a marquee, and you utilise it how you want and get what we need in a football point of view,”’ Pignata explained. ‘It was purely a football decision. Mark is 31, still playing at international level. Yeah, he’s not well known, but

neither was someone like [Besart] Berisha when he came here, or [Thomas] Broich. Hopefully by May next year everyone will know who Marc Janko is.'

Napoliello remains a loyal Sydney FC fan. 'There is no disputing that Alessandro was great for both club and the league,' he said. 'I want a team that plays good football, if that is done with marquee players or not is not important. Consistently good football will have the fans back every week.'



RAUL BLANCO
Coach, Born 4/12/41; Previously with St. George; Current Assistant National Youth Coach Under 17 and Under 20.



ALEXANDER McPHERSON
Goalkeeper; Born 11/3/58; Previously with Marconi and Sydney City.



CRAIG WILLIAMS
Defender; Born 6/6/66; Previously with Gladstone, Hornsby; Represented N.S.W. in 1978, '82, '83 and '84.



DAVID REZO
Defender; Born 18/1/62; Came from Sydney Croatia;



ALAN HUNTER
Midfielder; Born 30/7/64; Previous clubs include Sydney Croatia and Brisbane Lions; Represented Australia in 1987-88.

1990/91 . . . the season

1 Wollongong Macedonia	Away Draw 0-0	10 Marconi-Fairfield	Away Loss 3-2	19 Preston Makedonia	Home Draw 1-1
2 South Melbourne	Home Loss 1-2	11 Melbourne Croatia	Home Loss 1-2	20 Wollongong City	Away Draw 1-1
3 Sydney Croatia	Away Draw 1-1	12 Sydney Olympic	Home Win 1-0	21 St. George	Home Win 2-1
4 Sunshine G.C.	Home Loss 2-4	13 Adelaide City	Away Draw 1-1	22 Heidelberg United	Away Loss 2-1
5 Apia Leichhardt	Away Win 0-1	14 Wollongong Macedonia	Home Win 3-0	23 Marconi-Fairfield	Home Win 2-1
6 Preston Makedonia	Away Draw 1-1	15 South Melbourne	Away Loss 1-0	24 Melbourne Croatia	Away Draw 2-2
7 Wollongong City	Home Loss 1-3	16 Sydney Croatia	Home Draw 1-1	25 Adelaide City	Home Win 3-1
8 St. George	Away Win 1-2	17 Sunshine G.C.	Away Win 1-2	26 Sydney Olympic	Away Win 1-0
9 Heidelberg United	Home Win 4-0	18 Apia Leichhardt	Home Draw 1-1	10 Wins - 9 Draws - 7 Losses	

MELITA

Cup Winners: 1991



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AIR MALTA



SCOTT O'DONELL
Defender; Born 19/6/67; Came from Melita from Rockdale in 1989.



ANDREW CALLANAN
Midfielder; Born 30/8/66; Previously with Bankstown; Played in N.S.W. Under 18's and was selected in Australian Squad in 1990.



LEONARD VIAL
Midfielder; Born 5/6/65; Came from Adelaide City in 1989; Played in Australian Schoolboys squad, NSW U/12-16 and 1981 Australian Youth Squad.



MARSHALL SOPER
Striker; Born 12/5/61; Played in National team for 3 years; Previous clubs include Apia, Wollongong City and Sydney Olympic.



GREG BROWN
Striker; Born 29/7/62; Played for Manchester United in 1980; Played for Australia in 1990; also played in Friendly New Zealand Reps vs Russia in 1988.

THE MAN BEHIND MELITA EAGLES

SHAUN MOONEY

I AM SEATED AT AN ITALIAN CAFÉ IN PEMULWUY IN SYDNEY'S western suburbs, and my subject is late for our interview. As the minutes pass, I receive a call from James Chetcuti, a former president of Melita Eagles and a current director at Football NSW. 'Look, is it possible if you can come to Sam's house? He's a bit frail. He doesn't move around like he used to.'

I don't mind. Sam Vella, the former president of Melita Eagles, lives just ten minutes drive from my home. I pay for my coffee and hop into the car. Driving through Blacktown, I pass fibro homes built on cheap land, a throwback to the 1950s where new migrants to Australia bought cheap and set down roots. Over the years many of the homes have been upgraded with cladding, along with the occasional brick veneer. Sam's house is much like the club he presided over: understated, within his financial means and yet exuding a sense of pride. The Maltese are renowned for their lawns and gardens, and the grass out the front of Sam's house is immaculately kept. As I enter, there is a sense of apprehension in the greeting. The people of football's yesteryear have a story to tell yet many are not willing to hear it. A lot of time has passed since Sam has been asked to share his narrative. *There must be a catch.*

'Everything you need to know about the club is in this

envelope,' says Sam brusquely as he hands me a C4-sized white envelope with the words 'Melita Story' written in black marker on the front. The penmanship has the noticeable trace of a hand that has become less steady over time. Sam takes the envelope back and begins to go through the contents. He is shorter than I remember. It was less his height and more his gravitas that made him stand out against the rest of the Maltese men I knew growing up. 'Poor Sam,' people said when I told them I would be interviewing him. 'He's so frail now.' This lingers in the back of my mind throughout. I think we all remember him for the proud, powerful figure he once was.

Like many Maltese of his generation, Sam has a very formal way of speaking and writing. His voice is strong and forthright, and there is distinct Maltese accent. At times he sounds like a soapbox orator. There is passion in his voice, but also a keen sense of humour.

'This one I wrote on the plane on the way to Malta,' explains Sam as he pulls out a three-page document titled *Melita Eagles... The Story: The Beginning*. I glance at the front page and shake my head in disbelief. The official history of Melita Eagles, released in part for the club's 50th anniversary in 2006, has so many holes in it. I explain to Sam how difficult it had been to piece together the story. Other clubs such as Marconi Stallions, Sydney United '58 and Sydney Olympic have all produced comprehensive books to record their histories. But Melita Eagles were never a powerhouse, and were largely ignored by the football media. This white envelope contains the missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.

Sam begins to drop his guard as he realises the true purpose of our meeting. He sits down in an oversized lounge chair facing the television. The volume is never turned down and I wonder if he will slip in and out of conversation if I begin to bore him. James and I sit on the sofa, whilst Sam's wife Merle is busy in the kitchen. She will join us shortly after, helping Sam piece together the parts of his life that his memory can no longer recall. I read the first couple of pages of Sam's notes. I ask a few questions for clarification.

Soon, I realise I'm chasing the wrong story. This story is as much about Sam as it is about Melita Eagles. Ray Gatt, the chief football writer for the *Australian*, was right when he told me, 'Sam Vella was Melita.'

Sam was born in the village of Zaabar in Malta in 1932. At the age of 15, his family immigrated to Australia, settling in Edgecliff in Sydney's eastern suburbs. 'My father came first,' Sam explains. 'There was a shortage of houses, and he paid £400 for a key! You know what £400 was like in those days? Oh Jesus! He was a fitter who earned £7 a week. That money was saved in Malta.'

In April 1953, Sam and a few Maltese friends were playing football outside Paddington Methodist Church in Sydney's inner-eastern suburbs when they decided to set up their own team. It was a family affair. Sam and his brother Charlie; the Agius brothers Joe, John and Teddy; Joe and Tony Spiteri, Charlie Scicluna, Charlie Bartolo and Sam Aquilina held their initial meetings around Joe Spiteri's bed. As most of the players lived within the inner suburbs of Sydney, it was decided to hold a meeting at nearby Centennial Park. Under the shade of a tree, on a Sunday morning on June 14, 1953 the Melita Soccer Football Club was born.

The financial prudence of the club can be noted from the beginning. Mary Agius, the mother of Joe, John and Teddy, made the jerseys to save on start up costs. The jersey was red body with white long sleeves, a white lace up collar, and the Maltese eight-pointed cross on the left breast. 'We all put in two pounds for some material,' explains Sam. 'It was exactly like the Maltese national team jersey, except the cross is bloody enlarged!'

Registered in the Eastern Suburbs Soccer Football Association (ESSFA), Melita's first friendly game ended 3-3 against Sam's old team Paddington Methodist Church. The second game was against a group of young English migrants who were also training at Centennial Park called Bernardo Boys. Melita were thrashed 11-0 (some records say 9-1 – perhaps the record keeper lost count?).

At one point, Charlie Bartolo and Sam clashed heads as they challenged for the ball. Realising the seriousness of the situation, Sam Aquilina ran from one side of the pitch to the other and out onto the street to try to find a taxi to take the injured players to hospital. He was unsuccessful in his attempts, and so they piled into John Agius' Vanguard and hot-footed to the hospital. Bartolo had broken his nose and Sam required seven stitches to his forehead. It was a prophetic beginning: Sam Vella had spilt blood for his club in somewhat comical circumstances.

Despite its humble beginnings, Melita had aspirations to be more than simply a bunch of mates who played football together on weekends. At the conclusion of the first season the club decided to send a delegation to formulate an agreement with the Maltese Settlers Association (MSA).

'They were situated right in the heart of the Maltese community,' said Sam in an interview for the club's 50th anniversary. 'It was imperative that we affiliate with them and have a home which we could use as headquarters, small as it was, it was better than nothing. They were a very active Maltese organisation and the forerunners of the Phoenician Club of Australia, the only Maltese Licensed Club. As they were holding negotiations to rent a much bigger place, it made it all the more important to be part of this Association.' An agreement between Melita and MSA was signed on April 4, 1955, and in July, MSA Social Club moved to larger premises in Surry Hills.

The ravages of World War II sent the second wave of Maltese migrants to Australia, and among them were many footballers that had played in the Maltese national team and the Maltese first division. Players arrived from clubs such as Hamrun Spartans, Hibernians, Floriana FC and Valletta FC. Melita grew quickly and in 1955 they fielded three teams – one in first division and two in second division, with one of the teams made up entirely of youth players called Malta United. More Maltese clubs began to join the

competition, with Catholic Youth Organisation Darlinghurst and Malta Eagles playing in first division. Emmanuel Mifsud, Lawrence Dimech and John P. Albany – all of whom would later be on Melita Eagles board – were running a junior soccer team in Malta called Hamrun Eagles. Sam had originally approached Dimech about the players joining Melita, but the Malta Eagles wanted to stay as a unit. Malta Eagles also fielded a team in second division, along with two teams from C.Y.O. Darlinghurst and FALA (Fellows of Art Lovers Association), which was made up of Maltese migrants from Egypt.

Melita's story is marked by periods of great progress followed by rapid failure. Indeed in 1956 the fledgling club almost ended as quickly as it began when MSA decided to disaffiliate Melita following some conflict between members. The club lost its meeting place, but gained a new home ground at nearby Moore Park.

Sam was also on the move. In 1956, Sam married Merle, an Australian woman. 'My wife is Australian, but she was right in the middle of the Maltese,' Sam explains. 'All my friends were Maltese,' says Merle by way of clarification. Sam and Merle bought a house in Dulwich Hill in Sydney's inner west. 'It was a big block,' says Merle. 'You could have built two houses on it, it was that big.'

Football continued to be central to Sam's life. The rivalry between the two Maltese clubs – Melita and Malta Eagles – became so intense that both sides went to great lengths to strengthen their squads. Melita poached Joe Schieda from Malta Eagles, signed three Maltese internationals and Joe LaRosa from Hamrun Spartans, a club from the Maltese First Division. They also signed a Maltese under-21 player Eddie Calleja.

As a result, the clashes between the two sides were heated. 'They were our bitter enemies,' explains Sam, who estimates the first game at Moore Park drew a crowd of 2,500 to 3,000 spectators. Melita would win the game 3-0, with Malta Eagles having a player sent off for striking. In the return game Melita lost 3-1. When the

referee blew the final whistle, Melita's supporters ran onto the field to attack the official. 'He was attacked pretty severely but the club had nothing to do with the fracas,' said Sam in an interview.

'I remember having witnessed this, as it was on for young and old. Even a group of baseballers having a game in the corner of Queens Park came over and joined in the fight.'

At that point, Melita were leading the competition, but after ESSFA held an inquiry they decided to ban Melita forever. Melita won the appeal, however ESSFA refused to take them back. Facing oblivion, Melita were forced to either move to another association or merge with another club. Sam approached Lawrence Dimech from Malta Eagles about the possibility of amalgamating. But as Sam tells it, there was a greater reason for merging the two clubs. He felt it was not right for two Maltese clubs to compete so ferociously and pit the supporters against each other. Both men were of the same mind: football should unite, not divide the Maltese community.

Three meetings were held in a house in Enmore. Several points were thrashed out and a formal agreement was reached, and Melita Eagles United Soccer Football Club was born. It was agreed that the 'colours of the new club be "Red and White"' and that the new club 'will not enter into any competition in which other Maltese Clubs participates (wherever practicable).'

The spirit of Maltese unity, however, was set against larger tectonic shifts in the administration of football in New South Wales. The birth of the united club coincided with the formation of a new breakaway NSW Federation of Soccer Clubs. Many of the migrant clubs were angry with the refusal of the Association's to introduce automatic promotion and relegation, and Melita Eagles were one of the first clubs to join the breakaway competition.

In the first season of the competition in 1957, Melita Eagles finished premiers and grand final winners of the second division reserve grade competition. They played at Arlington Oval, not far from Sam's new home in Dulwich Hill. As more clubs joined the

Federation, the second division grew to two groups of ten teams each, and in 1959, Melita Eagles were placed in the third division.

But it wouldn't last long, and the club was promoted back to the second division in 1962. They adopted the name Melita Eagles Newtown and played their home games at Fraser Park, just ten minutes drive south-east from Arlington Oval. By 1967, the club had progressed to the top flight where they struggled for several seasons before being relegated in 1970.

'That is the story of Melita,' says Sam, almost resigned to the fact. I ask him why the club struggled to play in the top flight. 'We operate as a volunteer service,' he replies. 'Not like Marconi. They paid wages and high wages. We always aspired to be like Marconi and Hakoah...'

Many of Sam's responses are incomplete and hazy, perhaps owing to a fading memory. This time, he regains his thoughts. 'Because we are a small nation. We're a nation, a small nation. You look on the map and you imagine it's a fly's shit! Through the initiative of the Maltese people this made from small, to not too big, and then down again.' Sam often explains both the shortcomings and the achievements of the Maltese community through the size of the tiny Mediterranean island nation.

By the end of the 1976 season Melita Eagles finished last and were lucky to avoid relegation to the third division. Due to the establishment of the National Soccer League they were given a reprieve by the state federation and stayed in the second division. During this year the administration of the club was passed over to the Phoenician Club of Australia, which was a harbinger for a change in fortune both on and off the field.

In 1977 the club went undefeated to win the second division. In 1978 and 1979 they were Ampol Cup finalists, and in 1980 Melita were premiers and grand finalists in the New South Wales first division. After years of moving from ground to ground, starting off in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, moving through the inner

west and then playing out in the western suburbs of Auburn and Granville, the club decided to find a permanent home. 'Our real home should be in Wentworthville, Pendle Hill, Greystanes or Auburn/Granville,' the president, Emanuel Said, told Keith Gilmour from *Soccer World*.

In the 1920s, many Maltese immigrants began to purchase plots of land for farming in the Greystanes and Pendle Hill areas in western Sydney. Grace Karsens' *Holroyd: A Social History of West Sydney* states that nine farms were run by Maltese within this area in 1926. As the next wave of Maltese immigrants arrived in Sydney after World War II, the first wave who owned large parcels of land began to subdivide the plots and sold them to their countrymen. These farmers also set up markets in Parramatta and many inner city Maltese would travel to do their grocery shopping in the west. Although Maltese were British subjects, many of them did not escape the racial discrimination at the time. These farms around Pendle Hill became a refuge for Maltese to socialise and feel at home with their people.

By 1977, the Maltese had one of their own inside the Parramatta City Council. After the 1977 municipal elections, Alderman Joe Dougall moved for the land at Everley Park in Chester Hill to be given to Melita Eagles. 'We always aspired to have our own property,' explains Sam. 'The Maltese Settlers [Association]... they were one of the first to have their own property.'

On September 4, 1978, Parramatta City Council agreed in principle to lease the property to Melita Eagles. The local Maltese community were closely tied with the Labor Party and used their influence to get local members of parliament to support their cause. The East Granville Branch of the Australian Labor Party and the local member for Granville threw their support behind it. The Parramatta City Council prepared a lease, granting the northern section of Everley Park to Melita Eagles. The Phoenician Club Ltd, who at the time controlled the Melita Eagles teams, demanded that they be appointed trustee of the lease. On October 25, 1979 the official lease was signed.

The Phoenician Club chipped in \$60,000, and in 1980 The Department of Sport and Recreation granted \$30,000 and Parramatta City Council gave \$36,000. 'All with wheeling and dealing,' adds Sam. 'Some Maltese businessman helped too.'

'Community raised eh?' says James.

'Yes,' says Sam. 'We got a quarter of a million. Which we later assessed [the stadium] at five or six million dollars.'

'That was for materials. All of the labour was done by volunteers,' James clarifies for me.

'The Maltese!' proclaims Sam, as if to stress the point that the stadium was built by the people, for the people.

On July 5, 1981 the premier of New South Wales, Neville Wran, officially opened the club, and within a year the club had signed a new 20-year lease. The stadium was named after a committeeman Don Aguis, who Sam tells me organised the money for its construction.

Suddenly, Sam stands up and walks to a glass cabinet in the living room. He collects his Hall of Honour medal he received in 2009 from Football Federation Australia. 'It's not solid gold. It's plated,' he says as he hands it to me. In 1995, Sam received an Order of Australia Medal and is also a Life Member of Football NSW. I get the sense that Sam is proud of being acknowledged for his dedication to the game, but no reward could ever match his effort.

In 1984, the NSL expanded from 14 teams to 24 and separated into two conferences. This expansion meant Melita Eagles were promoted after losing just three games in the 1983 State League Division One. However, despite finishing nine points ahead of Wollongong City, they were relegated at the end of the season. Wollongong, Canberra and Newcastle were all granted 'development status' by the NSL and could not be relegated. 'That first relegation was really tough for us,' says Sam. It took the club until 1989 to return to the top flight.

Sam rates Raul Blanco as the club's greatest coach. In 1991/92 season the club finished fifth, its best ever result in the NSL. Having changed their name from Melita to Parramatta Eagles, Blanco led the club to a historic 1-0 win over Preston Makedonia in the NSL Cup. It was around this time that I began to become a regular attendee at Melita Stadium. I went to most the NSL grounds that were near my home, but because I grew up in 'Little Malta', my friend's parents took me to Melita Stadium.

The memories start flooding back. I remember standing on the hill in front of the scoreboard at Melita Stadium with my friends, the old Maltese men jokingly calling us 'hoodlums'. I remember the oldies swinging their wooden rattles over their heads, the distinctive click and swirl sound echoing around the Don Agius Stadium, the chorus of 'ma taghmlu xejn' sung in unison. I remember the technically gifted players: Gerry Gomez, Gabriel 'Chi Chi' Mendez, Marshall Soper and AYTEK GENC. I remember GENC's quick turn of speed, his drop of the shoulder to beat an opponent and his clever retention of possession. Melita Stadium – and in particular Raul Blanco's Cup winning side – played a fundamental part of my football education.

Despite the success of 1991/92 season, Melita Eagles struggled to compete financially with the bigger clubs. In an interview with Mike Cockerill from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sam said the club only spent \$500,000 on wages. 'We never spent that much,' Sam tells me with a twinkle in his eyes. 'Let people believe what they want to believe.' I glance at James, and we all laugh.

'We would have liked to have pokies because anyone would play them,' Sam continues. 'We always wanted to try to compete with the big clubs for sponsorship. My way of thinking: I competed with every bloody club for businesses but as I said we're a small nation. We are the smallest nation. I said we can't go and compete against the Italians, the Yugoslavs, the Croatians. But playing wise, we can compete.' Statesman Sam has returned.

In 1995, Soccer Australia relegated Melita Eagles along with Brunswick Juventus and Heidelberg United. David Hill, the new chairman of Soccer Australia had only in his role for eight weeks, but when he looked over the financials and crowd figures of the NSL clubs, it was decided that some clubs were no longer a viable option. For the 1994/95 season Melita had an average attendance of just 3,400, a figure that wasn't much higher than in the early days when Melita Eagles and Malta Eagles used to play local park football. It simply wasn't enough to keep them in a national competition. Still, Melita, Heidelberg and Brunswick all filed injunctions with the courts and the decision eventually came down to a vote.

Ironically, the vote was conducted by the former premier of New South Wales and the man who opened Melita Stadium, Neville Wran, who was then president of Soccer Australia. Hill lost the first ballot by one vote, and the clubs should have been reinstated to the NSL.

'That should have been the end of the matter,' Hill told Ross Solly in his book *Shoot Out: Passion and Politics of Soccer's Fight for Survival in Australia*. 'Wran should have declared the motion lost. But I told Wran we should have another ballot. Adjourn for twenty minutes.'

I begin to read aloud the scene of events to Sam from Solly's book. 'During the break, Ian Holmes took aside John Hedison, the representative of the NSW Amateurs and implored him to change his vote. Sensing it was possible, Holmes told Hill, who also approached Hedison. On a walkway at the back of the MA Noble Stand, Hill and Hedison sealed the fate of the three clubs.'

Sam nods, accepting Solly's record of events to be true. 'We had a rally at the stadium,' he says. 'We had four thousand people sign the book.' I continue reading: 'David Hill said "We had another ballot, which was completely unconstitutional". Sam Vella also knew it was unconstitutional. He stood up and told Wran he'd

always respected and admired him...’

‘That’s true,’ nods Sam.

I look down to continue reading the paragraph. ‘...but what he was trying to do was improper.’

James and Merle laugh. ‘That’s Sam alright,’ says James with a smile.

‘Neville Wran was a friend of mine, but he did the dirty things,’ says Sam matter-of-factly. ‘He used to always sit next to me at the games. When they were taking the penalties in the Uruguay game...’ Merle interrupts, finishing off the sentence for Sam: ‘He was sitting next to us when Aloisi scored that last goal to win the game.’ Sam would later refuse to accept his nomination as a life member to Soccer Australia.

Sam gets up again and walks out of the room. I fear I have reopened old wounds, but Merle wants to focus on the positives. ‘We had good years at Melita. Same players, year in, year out,’ she says. ‘It was like family.’

Sam returns to the room and hands me a framed article written by Cockerill titled ‘Fighting for Survival’. The pain of Sam’s voice jumps off the page.

We have been dumped without being told why. We fulfilled the criteria, we have followed the rules, but we get the bullet, just like that. That is where the bitterness comes in. That is why we are determined to fight it. Nobody, not even Jesus Christ, can abuse the constitution like that. I am a hard old bastard, everybody knows that. But this whole thing has brought tears to my eyes. It is like someone has plunged a knife into my heart.

Noticing in the article that the club’s wages had increased over the years, I ask Sam how much the club spent. ‘As I said, let people believe what they want to believe,’ he responds. The twinkle in his eyes has returned.

Parramatta Eagles fought Soccer Australia's decision to dump them out of the NSL, and Sam was there every day in the courts, often by himself. The court case was a financial toll on the club, but also took a personal toll on Sam. In 1997, he suffered a stroke, which meant that he had to step down as president. After over 40 years of dedication to the club, Sam was broken. Some years later he would suffer a heart attack. Just as in 1957, 1976 and 1984, soccer politics rather than on-field performance had been at the centre of his club's battles with promotion and relegation. Sam's body had had enough.

Crowds dwindled as the club was no longer on the national stage and a couple of years later sponsorship dollars from local Maltese businesses began to dry up. By 2007, the 50th anniversary of the club, the board struck a deal with Police & Community Youth Clubs (PCYC) to merge and pay off all of the club's debts. The club was rebranded PCYC Parramatta Eagles. In 2011, James became president of the club. Prior to his arrival, PCYC ended its arrangement with the club. In need of financial backing to survive, the committee made the difficult decision to sell the club to Granville & Districts Soccer Football Association (GDSFA).

The demise of Melita Eagles and Sam's departure has seen the club slowly lose its Maltese identity. Those who remember going to matches at Melita Stadium during the NSL would notice that it is no longer a club for the Maltese people. 'It's not the same,' says Sam simply.

Some 90 minutes have passed and I begin to worry that I have taken up too much of Sam's time. James excuses himself as he has another commitment. The voice recorder is switched off and the conversation turns to my family. Any initial apprehension has long disappeared.

Sam pulls out his black book to take down my phone number. 'So I'm going into your black book?' I ask. Without missing a beat,

Sam replies: 'Oh, I have a few black books.' I am summoned to follow him. We enter into a study in the back of the house and it is a treasure trove full of football memorabilia. The history of Melita Eagles is stored in Sam's private museum. The voice recorder is promptly switched back on.

'Which one do you think is me?' asks Sam pointing to the framed photo of the original Melita side in 1953. There he is, seated in the front row, second from the right. He is swarthy, with dark sunken eyes and a full head of hair. Sam's eyebrows are still thick and bushy, but his hair has receded and gone grey over time.

To my left is a wooden framed glass cabinet full of medals and pennants collected over the years. On my right is a wardrobe that looks like it has been converted into a stationary cabinet. Hanging off one of the doors would be thirty or so VIP passes on lanyards for various Soccerroos games. 'I used to get invited to every Soccerroos game in Sydney,' says Sam. 'It's too hard for me to go [now],' he adds sadly.

In truth, I am barely listening. My eyes are everywhere at once, taking in the vast collection. My gaze falls on the red booklets sitting on top of the desk at the back of the room titled *Soccer Light: Official Organ of the Melita Eagles United S.F.C.* Produced in 1957, Sam explains that it is the club's first magazine. 'We only published three,' he says.

'Was it too expensive?' I ask.

'Yeah mate.'

I turn the pages carefully, as if I am reading an ancient tome. 'Very precious,' says Sam, who can sense my excitement. The pages are filled with local business advertisements, and while most of the articles are written in English, a few are in Maltese. The language used is strong, powerful and each contributor believes in the sense of mission. In one article, the writer calls the N.S.W Association a 'dictatorship'. In another, the President, John P. Albany, explains that the purpose of Melita Eagles:

It will do everything in its power to encourage, aid and

assist Maltese soccer players to emigrate to Australia. It will help them combat their initial loneliness and assist them to become acclimatised to Australian conditions.

In Sam's 'Club News' page, he explains what the club should be for the Maltese people. It is a simple yet powerful message that strikes at the heart of what migrant football clubs meant to their communities. Sam Vella was Melita, and Melita was for his Maltese people. Sam was a leader of his people because he was pragmatic about the reality of each situation and determined to move the club through the slumps. Always striving to be better, even when presented with insurmountable challenges, Sam believed in Melita.

If we are to achieve honour for our beloved home-country, "Malta", there is great need for more support from both members and players in the future. I say, that, if you support us, we would be in a much better position to give you better football and have a team that every Maltese in this our adopted country, would be proud of.



Q&A:

ANGE POSTECOGLOU

KATE COHEN

ANGE POSTECOGLOU IS THE MAN CREDITED WITH REVOLUTIONISING modern Australian domestic football. Back from years in the coaching wilderness, his Brisbane Roar side played a devastatingly successful and attractive brand of football, winning back-to-back A-League championships and a premiership in his two-and-a-half years at the club. Dubbed ‘Roar-celona’, Postecoglou’s side set the trend for playing out from the back, promoting a short passing game and emphasising player rotation. He then moved to Melbourne Victory for a season, before being appointed as the coach of the Australian men’s national team in October 2013.

Despite the unique playing style of Postecoglou’s sides, there can always be a danger in overstating the importance of the tactical side of the game. Yet in speaking to Postecoglou, you get the sense that he sees the overall picture of management. Fox Sports commentator Andy Harper had even suggested back in 2011 that Postecoglou would be the ideal person for corporate Australia to go to for advice on cultural change.

I sat down with Postecoglou before the Socceroos friendly matches against Belgium and Saudi Arabia. In a loud and bustling café in south-east Melbourne, any conversation on playing style or tactics quickly drifts back into a discussion on organisational

structure and the importance of environment in implementing change. He doesn't avoid questions on the tactical side of the game, but he is guarded and never focuses solely on one aspect of coaching. Indeed Postecoglou admits that he is not only a teacher but also a student, and that his bookshelf is filled with texts on business management and human behaviour.

Since his appointment as Socceroos manager, Postecoglou has had to work quickly to implement the off field structures and culture he demands, all while preparing for a World Cup and, in January 2015, an Asian Cup on home soil. Already in his short tenure as national team coach, there has been a noticeable shift. New players have been given an opportunity to establish themselves and a new style of play based on taking the game to the opposition has emerged. But just as crucial is what a national team coach does away from the matches and the media spotlight in the long spells away from camp.

KC: You said in 2012 that you preferred club management, being involved on a daily basis. How have you found the transition now that you're again involved in a national team environment?

AP: At the time I was working in a club environment so you'll always say that it's better. It's certainly different and obviously I had seven years involved in the youth [national] team so I already knew what it was like in terms of how time gets filled up in between games and doing things that aren't necessarily coaching. Since I've taken over, it's been a bit of a whirlwind, with the World Cup on the horizon and deciding to make quite a few changes both on and off the field.

The challenges weren't so much in the coaching aspect – from the point of view of being on the field – but a lot of management issues needed to be resolved. I was probably a lot busier than I thought I would be. That's not to say that, at club level, on a day-to-day basis you're not as busy but it's a lot more programmed.

You know how your week is going to run, you know everyone's designated roles and you follow the formula of: review, preparation and then the next game. Club management is a lot more structured and organised whereas with the national team, you're dealing with a lot of things that aren't programmed and just fall across your path at different times that you have to deal with. And that was also the uniqueness of when I took over – it was definitely the busiest program I've encountered as a football coach with the 6-8 months I had. I guess the most basic difference is that you're not on the track as much as you are at club football.

KC: Do you think the major difficulty with managing a national team is just the lack of time on the park with the team?

AP: I'm not sure if that's the major issue because whether you're coaching Australia or you're coaching Germany that challenge is the same because you have the same amount of time with the players. So I don't think time is the biggest challenge in that regard. For me the biggest challenge has been the change in the organisation that I wanted to bring through. It's a lot easier to do that a club level where you're there every day, you're dealing with people on a daily basis and you're able to make the necessary changes a little bit more smoothly. With the national team, you have your full time staff which is seven or eight people, but apart from that, the others have their own clubs – whether that's players or the additional staff – and you don't have that day-to-day contact. That becomes the real challenge of how you instill the culture and the philosophy if you don't see people on a daily basis.

KC: So in not having that daily access to not only the players but also the staff, what steps do you need to put in place to make sure the plans you set out take course?

AP: So far, because I have made so many changes, it's in the embryonic stages of where I want the team to be. We have had a

fair bit of time together now, particularly with the World Cup. The World Cup was really the first time I had people like Ante Milicic and Peter Cklamovski on board, because they were all with their clubs [before the World Cup], so I used that time as much time as possible to instill the philosophy I want. Now, the challenge with coaching, as with anything in life, is that people you work with tend to agree with you all the time. But to have them buy into the philosophy that I want, at times you have to let them go out, do their own thing and then see if they've truly grasped what I want rather than just doing what I tell them.

Sometimes you don't know whether they've grasped that until you're well into the process. If you're in a position where they want to support the person they work with, often that means just agreeing with you, but agreeing with someone and truly believing in what they're wanting to do are two separate things.

I've found, at club level, I was able to establish that relationship quicker, over a course of time, on a day-to-day basis. Whether that's with an assistant coach or any member of staff, I'm able to see pretty early on whether they've grasped what I wanted. Whereas with the national team, that's been a challenge and I guess that's where the World Cup became an even bigger struggle because I was trying to ingrain everyone around me with what I want them to do, whilst playing a major tournament at the same time.

So I guess I will find out over the next course of time how much they've understood what I want, where we're heading and how much they've really bought into it. In the initial stages it's just about language and actions and hopefully everything I do is reflective of the direction I want to take.

KC: What kind of habits do you then look to instill into the players, on field and off field?

AP: I think, with the players, whether it's on field or off field, the environment is the biggest factor. As soon as they walk into a room, it's what they see and what they hear. For the national team, when

we're in camp, that's the most important time. [After taking over as Socceroos manager] I was big on making sure that when they came into camp, they saw the change.

It would be hard for them to see a change if you're doing things in exactly the same way as in the past and with the same people. And it was also about changing the way we work and the way we talk to them. Most players, especially early on, want to impress and they'll do the right thing, then after a little bit of time you'll find out who's actually buying into it. If you change the environment, and that's what I've always done, it becomes pretty easy to identify who doesn't fit in and who does. Even from a playing perspective, in terms of the way we want to play, you find out pretty quickly who can cope with the style of game we want to play.

KC: Your style is quite demanding. When the players come back into camp, is there a certain process you go through to refresh the types of playing habits the style requires? For example making sure they look to receive and play forward?

AP: The way I like my teams to play is fairly evident, but even that evolves. I'm certainly looking to challenge certain aspects of the way we play the game, and only because the game is constantly changing so if you get stuck playing one way, there is a danger that you will get bypassed.

There are basic, core principles that won't change and those are the ones that we constantly reinforce in training. A lot of that just comes down to language and constant reinforcement of that. After a while, I find they pretty much understand the language that we use and then the players start to use that same terminology and that's when you know they're seeing it as well.

KC: So it's about constantly repeating those same messages over and over again?

AP: Absolutely. Obviously if you keep saying the same things,

there's a danger people will phase out but there's certain things you keep emphasising and that are non-negotiable and after a while, the players understand 'this is something we have to do, this is part of the process.' So playing forward, or looking to play forward at the earliest possible time. But what does that mean and what does that look like? How do you execute that and what cues are you looking for? Those are the kind of behaviours you look to get in really early.

KC: Do you look for those kinds of behaviours, the way they look do play, first before you select them? Or do you bring them into camp and see if you can implement that style?

AP: I think that will be a bit of an evolutionary thing. One thing that struck me after the World Cup is that we really lack depth. Going into the World Cup, we were very light on in certain parts of the squad. Now it's about broadening the depth we've got. To do that, we need to cast the net far and wide and look beyond just players who I think can play a certain style of game, and then seeing if they can pick it up in camp and adjust their game to play the game we want. But eventually we want to get to the point where we can select players who fit into our style of play. I think that we can get to that stage and we can get there quicker than most people think. Not only because some of the younger ones show some of the attributes I look for, but also because younger players tend to be less resistant and more accepting of change and will embrace the direction. Of course there is a danger of inconsistencies of performances [with younger players], but I think we can get there a lot quicker, especially with some quality matches before the Asian Cup.

KC: So far during your tenure, you've used 29 players, do you have an ideal range of the number of players you can call up?

AP: It's hard to come up with an exact number but we would

like to think there would be a pool of between 30-50 players. At the moment, we're in the low-40s, in terms of the players we're monitoring. But realistically, how many of those do I think would be at the level we want? Not many.

So that's something we need to improve and as we found out in the lead up to the World Cup, there are things like injuries, players not playing regularly at their clubs, loss of form etc. and if the pool is narrow, we come up short. The next four years is about trying to broaden our squad and giving as much experience as we can to players who we believe can play a part in the future. That's where the games we play that aren't for points become just as crucial as the ones that are [for points].

KC: Will you be using upcoming friendly matches as an opportunity to test out new players?

AP: Absolutely. We have a window of opportunity to regenerate the team. We started the process in the lead up to the World Cup but in many respects I still had to make some 'safer' selections. Moving forward, our goal is to win the Asian Cup and qualify for the next World Cup in a healthier state and we won't do that unless we make some brave selections and start regenerating the team. The games that aren't being played for points are an opportunity to test new players at a level of competition they haven't face before.

KC: But if you have this pool of 40-odd players, not all of which have played at this level before or experienced one of your camps, how do you actually increase the size of this talent pool?

AP: The easiest process to do that is by just selecting them, regardless of other people's opinions of them. That means maybe calling up players who haven't been playing regularly, particularly younger players, for their clubs but that I believe have the potential to become outstanding player. In many respects, what we need to do is put the cart before the horse. Even with the World Cup, Jason

Davidson and Ivan Franjic got decent moves out of [playing for the Socceroos]. I think this process turns on its head what traditional national team selections have been about – where if a player starts and is in good form for their club side, they get a call up. Now, particularly with the younger ones, we have to see that, if they get into the national team, whether that accelerates their club careers.

KC: So the younger players who are making their breakthrough in the A-League and are in the youth national teams, you'll be using the Socceroos as a springboard for those players to move overseas?

AP: That's one avenue, yes. By the time the next World Cup comes around, we want a large number of our players playing in the top leagues. How does that happen? There are two ways: we can wait for the players to make a natural progression or, with how the world football works, people having international pedigree can help.

With the A-League and particularly the [national] youth teams, moving forward I'm trying to make the national team set up almost like a club structure where they can progress through the ranks and there is a natural pathway. We used to have that in the past, where if they did well in the Under 20s or the Olyroos, they could step up. And also, by selecting them for the national team while they're still eligible for the under-aged teams, we can send them back to play for the Olyroos or the Under 20s with some invaluable experience.

My role has changed. I've insisted that I want to be more involved with under-aged national teams and I think that will accelerate the regeneration of the national team.

KC: So will you be, in a sense, the Socceroos manager and also a Technical Director of sorts?

AP: I don't like the term 'Technical Director' because people tend to use it too broadly for too many positions. In a club structure, I would definitely have an interest in what's happening with the

youth teams and below, because that would have an effect on what happens to the first team. For me, I think it's natural to see what's happening with the national youth teams and that's the way I've always worked. It's a little bit of a shift in the way the national team coach's position has been defined in the recent past.

KC: If you are to have a role in shaping the next generation of players in Australia, what kind of a player are you looking for? What types of habits would you be looking for in a young player coming through?

AP: One thing I've always said is I don't like excluding anybody. Especially in our game in Australia, when you're dealing with a limited pool, I'm not going to rule out anyone. But I think with the type of football we want to play, it really needs footballers who are, in every respect, bold in their approach and committed to playing a proactive game. Defenders who don't just defend, or midfielders who adaptable are becoming more and more important. Without excluding anyone, especially if you've got a talented 'No10' or a talented defender who isn't comfortable playing out, I think the bulk of our team need to be able to play a proactive kind of game. And I've found that Australian players are more comfortable that way anyway. Once you give them the freedom to say 'the coach will give me the freedom to go forward', they're able to play that way.

KC: Do you think that not only the players' mindsets needs to change, but also the football community's as a whole? We saw after the South Africa game, James Holland for example came in for criticism when he turned over possession and it lead to their goal. Do you see yourself as having a role in, not preaching, but educating people on the direction you're taking the team?

AP: I'm reticent to tell people what they should believe, think and see. James certainly didn't receive any criticism from us for that pass because that's his job. If he had have played that pass

sideways, he was more likely to have copped an earful from me.

The reason we conceded that goal is not because we gave the ball away. It was a sequence of mistakes in our structure. That's what we look at and I've certainly found that the general football public are beginning to appreciate the kind of football we play. Being at the World Cup, we were in a bit of a cocoon so you don't really know what people think, but when we got back, people were positive about our performances. I don't think that would have happened in the past, having lost three games, where people were so positive, and in many respects, people were too positive because I certainly wasn't with the way things went.

I think people are appreciating what we're trying to build and I'm certainly not going to preach. I think that's the beauty of football. I love that people see the game through different eyes and see different things. That's not going to change the way I see the game and what I believe in, but I don't necessarily want everyone agreeing on the way the game should be played.

KC: What were the processes in place before, and what are they now, in terms of scouting Australian talent overseas?

AP: That's a big challenge. Especially during the season when games kick off literally every night of the week where an Australian is playing. We set up a monitoring system before the World Cup which worked ok. It doesn't give you the best picture. Some of our players play in leagues that aren't as high profile so it's hard to always see footage of how they're going and you rely a lot on somebody's subjective opinion. We will continue using that monitoring system for all players playing at the moment, but beyond that it's about making sure that whenever one of our players gets on the pitch, he's being watched.

We've set up a scouting system in Europe. Ante Milicic, Aurelio Vidmar and Tony Franken are all taking off to watch some English Premier League games and to do some more scouting of players in our squad and it's literally about trying to make sure if someone's

playing at a good level, they're being watched. A lot of it is also about making sure, when we select our squad, we have the best information about what kind of condition the players are in. That goes beyond just whether the player has played 60 minutes, or 90 minutes.

KC: Scouting is a big task for the national team. You not only have to monitor your own players but you also have to monitor opposition. Do you also have a scouting network in place to look at upcoming opponents?

AP: That's what we're looking to do now. In terms of opposition analysis, Peter Cklamovski is the head analyst and he's the one in charge of that department. I think that will be the department with the most growth, in terms of resources and personnel, in the coming years. With the monitoring of players, once we come up with a pool of players and set up the scouting network, that becomes almost an easier part. But the opposition analysis is a more challenging part.

At the moment, we have two games coming up and we need the opponents analysed. So we will look at half a dozen games of each of [the teams], and at the same time we have another two games coming up that we need to prepare for and while we're doing that, we need to be doing analysis on all of our opponents for the Asian Cup. That means just about every team at the Asian Cup, not just the teams in our group, because we want to go beyond that.

So when you talk about that kind of depth of analysis, it goes beyond just one person and I think that's the area where we need to expand the most. And again, it's still in the embryonic stages. Peter only came on board at the end of the last A-League season. I expect, over the next 12 months, we'll have expanded that department.

KC: What do you look for when you scout opponents?

AP: You tend to look for patterns, but that can sometimes be difficult at international level because in between games, coaches can change. For example, we're going to the Asian Cup and Japan and South Korea will all have new coaches and that will affect how they play.

[Before the World Cup], we did a lot of work on our opponents and our analysis was good in telling us the way they were going to play and the patterns they had. Even the Dutch game, we weren't sure if they were going to go with three at the back and there was a chance they would play with four at the back and it was a little bit uncertain, but the players were really comfortable with the information we gave to them, both collectively and individually. The way we set it up at the World Cup was that when we did opposition analysis, we showed the group collectively the patterns and the way the opposition play and Ante [Milicic] would then focus on the individuals in the team, with a synopsis on each individual in the team, and then after that he would talk to individuals in our team and sit down with them one-on-one and go through their direct opponents. We don't want to over analyse it...

KC: Is there a risk of giving the players too much information?

AP: Absolutely. Our video analysis never goes for more than 12 minutes. It might go to 15 minutes if there's something that I think is absolutely essential, but 12 minutes is the maximum for the team analysis. Individual analysis comes down to the individual player. Some players want more, others want less and that's why that's done separately from the group – we don't sit there and go through every single player apart from a very general synopsis. If someone wants more detail, we do that with the player who wants it.

We don't want to give them too much information and, with the way I coach, we tend to focus more on ourselves, regardless of the opposition. From our perspective, if I spend a lot of time talking about the opposition, it goes against my philosophy of playing proactively and taking the game to the opposition.

KC: When you've come up against stronger opponents, and when you come against them again in the future, is there ever a change of mentality for you with how you approach the match?

AP: I want to get to a point where we can control games and you'll never get there if you give up before you start. We knew, when we came up against Chile, the Dutch and the Spanish, that it would be a challenge. I think by the time we got to the Spain game we were spent, both from a physical and an emotional perspective. The Dutch game, from a controlling aspect, wasn't too bad. The way I like to play doesn't necessarily mean complete domination of possession. Some of it is about drawing the opposition forward so we can play the kind of game we want. But for the most part, we want to be in a position where we can control most games.

The flip side of that is, in our region, there shouldn't be a reason why we don't dominate games. We're never going to get to that point if, every time we're faced with a challenge, we revert back to a conservative mentality. And one thing about players is, they work out pretty quickly how much conviction a manager has. Once you start chopping and changing [your approach], the players start questioning how much you believe what you're saying. Even against the Dutch and the Spanish, we still went out there with the intent to try and control the game. It didn't work out that way, but the next time we face a challenge we'll try and do the same again.

KC: If the lead up to the World Cup and the World Cup itself was an opportunity to set a base, what things will you be looking to add to that?

AP: I wasn't totally satisfied with how we went at the World Cup and I thought there were some lapses in our defence, particularly in the organisation, that cost us. We made the same mistake two or three times and we paid the price. That's the reality of the level of competition that we're at. There were some aspects of our

defensive organisation that I thought were very, very ordinary and avoidable. That's certainly one area we're looking to rectify and even going forward, I thought our approach play could have been more positive.

That's easy for me to say. The opponents we faced were always going to make it difficult. But my thinking, going into the World Cup, was that we would endeavour to play the style of play we want against the best in the world. We fell short, but moving forward there shouldn't be any fears.

Now reinforcement becomes an expectation. I now expect our players to play our way without any fears of retribution because we've already tried it at the highest possible level. As I said, reinforcement now becomes expectation and I can become more demanding in what I expect from my players in executing the kind of game I want them to play.

KC: One problem in recent years has been a lack of goals, and an over-reliance on Tim Cahill to score, with a lot of young and quick attackers, what kind of patterns are you looking for to ensure we pose a greater threat going forward?

AP: That will be a bit of an evolution. With Tim Cahill, I'm not dumb enough to ignore that we have a world class striker. Watching him at training and in games, people are really scared of him. The World Cup was about 'how can we maximise that threat that we have'? I think that worked really well for us and we got into the right areas but there were times where we should have been a lot more positive and where we should have got into those areas a lot quicker.

Moving forward, with the style of game we want to play, hopefully we have threats from different avenues. That's not just our strikers. We didn't have enough of a threat from midfield and that [area] was where we were most conservative. We lacked a creative midfielder who was able to get into the final third, create chances and score goals. That's an area we need to improve on.

Mobility in our front three will also become more and more important as our style of play evolves and getting our players to understand that the threat can come from wide areas and from deep areas. Mathew Leckie, Tommy Oar and Ben Halloran are still very early into their international careers, and some of the other younger ones too. I think they have the attributes we're after, now it's just about creating a framework that will allow them to be at their most dangerous.



DEPOSING THE TYRANT: THE GROWTH OF REGIONAL FOOTBALL

VINCE RUGARI

IN 1966, HISTORIAN GEOFFREY BLAINEY WROTE PERHAPS HIS most famous book, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*. Blainey argued that Australia's geographic isolation from the rest of the world – in particular from Great Britain – formed the country's history, economy and overall identity. More than half a century on, even with incredible advancements in technology, Blainey's theory remains relevant. But there is a second tyranny that still haunts Australia, crippling the way certain elements of our society function: size. As Australia developed into one of the most urbanised countries in the world, with around 80% of the population living within 50km of the coast, the disconnect between the big cities and small regional areas widened. It is the inevitable consequence of the sheer enormity of this landmass. Ask anyone in inland New South Wales, for instance, about the performance of any level of government and they'll tell you politicians don't care what happens on their side of the Blue Mountains. They're too far away to matter.

Just as the twin tyrannies of distance and size have shaped the Australian psyche, they have also shaped the progress of

Australian sport, and which codes dominate which areas. If sport is an intrinsic part of being Australian, it is doubly so for those in rural Australia, where sport is a major source of social capital. Playing rugby league or Australian Rules football for the local club is a rite of passage for those brought up in the bush. Over the summer months, it becomes cricket's turn to dominate local sporting conversations and back pages. Football, on the other hand, has always been a game played in the margins, even if participation numbers might suggest it has always been right up there in the popularity stakes. Owing to its historical spread through the country, the round-ball game failed to carve out a real slice of the action in regional Australia, and when it has, it's been tough going.

Football in Australia owes a great deal of gratitude to the immigrants and their children who fostered the sport, from the British either side of the turn of the century to the second wave of Europeans who came in the 1950s and 1960s and propelled the game forward. These immigrants largely congregated in the capital cities or in industrial areas like Newcastle where work was on offer. As a result, football became a metropolitan game. That's not to say it wasn't played in the regions; indeed it was, quite regularly, and often quite well. But the challenges faced by its proponents were monstrous. Crudely, football was rejected by the masses in favour of the rugby codes and Australian Rules, which were seen as masculine sports more in tune with what it meant to be an Australian bushman. The collision sports were more appealing, homespun alternatives to what was dubbed an outsider's game. Just like everywhere else in the pre and early Federation days, poor administration, poor record-keeping and an almost non-existent sense of history meant that football was never in control of its own narrative. When an isolated town embraced football and could rustle up the requisite numbers for a team, the trouble became finding an opposition close enough to play against.

Football Federation Australia recognises that the game has a problem in country areas. One of the gaps outlined in the first edition of the National Football Curriculum is the omission of talent from regional Australia. Sure, there have been professional players and even Socceroos to have come from far-flung regions, but nothing compared to the cavalcade of talent from other sports. There are very few areas with an intrinsic love for football on the same level as the bush's obsession with Australian Rules and rugby league. Visit Albury, for example, and you'd be forgiven for thinking the local Ovens & Murray Football League takes precedence over the AFL itself. The O&M is considered the best competition in country footy, boasts a roll-call of big names such as Brendan Fevola, Jason Akermanis and Justin Koschitzke and regularly attracts crowds of several thousand spectators. Even better, it is a nursery for future top-line talent. An incredible 11 O&M products took part in the 2014 AFL finals series.

There are, however, notable exceptions. The common link between all the parts of regional Australia that were able to develop a deep and meaningful soccer culture is immigration. Geelong is mad about Australian Rules football, but thanks to the influence of Croatian, Italian, Hungarian and other ethnic groups that arrived after World War II, the round-ball game became much stronger. In the agricultural Goulburn Valley region around two hours drive north of Melbourne, Greeks and Italians provided the same injection. In Cooma, a small town 114km south of the nation's capital, migrant workers attracted by the Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme propped up the football scene in their spare time. In 2014, Cooma Tigers, the local team, finished top of the ACT National Premier Leagues. Not even Mount Isa in remote north-west Queensland was untouched. In 1970, there were Anglo, Irish, German, Italian, Yugoslav and Dutch sides there, along with what historians believe is the only French team in Australian football history.

Griffith, a city of approximately 25,000 people situated almost equidistant of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, is perhaps one

of football's best-kept secrets. Established in 1916 as part of the NSW Government's Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area project, Italian farmers have populated Griffith since day one. It is said 60% of the current population can lay claim to at least some percentage of Italian blood. The pioneers from the old country brought with them food, wine and organised crime – the latter best represented by the second season of the TV series *Underbelly*, which was partly set in Griffith. But they also brought their love of *calcio*, and today, despite having played second fiddle to rugby league for decades, football is the most popular sport in town.

The local competition in Griffith is dominated by three teams, all of Italian origin. Kids in Griffith don't grow up wanting to play for Sydney FC or even Manchester United. They want to play first-grade for one of the big three: Yoogali SC, Yoogali FC or Hanwood. The reason why there are two teams that have taken the name of a township of little more than 1000 people, five minutes drive from the Griffith city centre, is a story for another day. Hanwood, on the other hand, is the strongest of the lot. Their solid junior base offered up Joey Schirripa, which should be a familiar name to followers of the National Soccer League. Schirripa, now 32, was named the NSL's under-21 player of the year for the 2002-03 season, winning the honour ahead of Jade North and Massimo Murdocca. In his twilight years he usually plays as a sweeper, but he is a natural left-sided player who was blessed with skill, speed and tactical nous, a true rarity in the Australian ranks.

Leopold Method spoke to Schirripa a few days before the Griffith association's 2014 grand final between Hanwood and Yoogali FC. In the week leading up football dominated the local press, which carried stories recounting the 60-year-old rivalry through the eyes of old boys from both clubs. Shopfronts along Griffith's main drag Banna Avenue were flourished with balloons, streamers and other decorations: blue and white for Hanwood, yellow and blue for Yoogali FC. It's an annual tradition, and one

that illustrates how much football means to the place. Football was an outlet for a young Schirripa as he grew up on the family vineyard, and for many kids just like him who did the same. ‘I was always just pinging the ball somewhere – against the wall, against the shed, whatever,’ he said. ‘All I did was ride motorbikes, fish, and play soccer.’

It was a typical country upbringing. Only a few hours away from Griffith is Wagga Wagga, the self-proclaimed ‘city of good sports’. As the hometown of sporting heroes such as Mark Taylor, Mark Slater, Geoff Lawson (cricket), Peter Sterling, the Mortimer brothers (rugby league), Wayne Carey and Paul Kelly (Australian Rules football), it is probably a fair enough nickname. Not a bad return for a population of less than 50,000. Researchers inevitably set off to discover why such a disproportionately large number of athletes have come from regional areas. Coining the term ‘the Wagga effect’, they concluded that bush kids have more space in which to play, are exposed to many different sports, and – crucially – live in towns big enough to sustain a good standard of sport, but small enough that talented juniors are exposed to senior competition at an early age. According to the book *Choke* by Sian Beilock, there is a similar phenomenon in the United States. More than half of the US population lives in cities with populations of at least 500,000 people, yet these cities only produce 13% of National Hockey League players, 29% of National Basketball League players, 15% of Major League Baseball players and 13% of players in the Professional Golfers Association of America.

Football is slowly waking up to this untapped resource. The National Football Curriculum states: ‘The historical immigration dynamic that has underpinned football in Australia appears to be weakening. This poses a major threat to Australia’s future talent pool unless offset by a much greater share of young athletes from rural areas.’ Sadly, any reference to regional Australia is absent from the second, revised version of the curriculum released last

year, but there is a feeling that the FFA's eyes have opened to the goldmine of potential that exists. To realise it, they must remove the barriers that made it so difficult for Schirripa and players like him to reach the top. A regular in New South Wales representative sides in his early teenage years, Schirripa was first spotted playing in Sydney for NSW Country by David Lee, the state football director. Lee put Schirripa into the Big Brother scholarship program, which farmed out young talents overseas to trial with professional clubs. Schirripa was actually offered a reserve-grade contract by Ipswich Town in England, but homesickness got the better of him and he chose to return home instead. 'I was on the radar from then,' he said.

What Schirripa learned from that experience was that he was more likely to find the remains of slain anti-marijuana campaigner Donald Mackay in Griffith than a scout on the hunt for football's next big thing. If Schirripa's dreams were going to come true, it was going to happen in Sydney. After making the Australian under-17s side at the tender age of 14, the process began to get him there. Eventually, The King's School in Parramatta offered him a scholarship, and at 16 he left his close-knit hometown for the big smoke. 'The secret is, I've always said, that kids have to learn to miss out to become successful,' said Schirripa, who spent time with the Northern Spirit, Newcastle Breakers and Sydney Olympic in the NSL in a career blighted by injury, before signing a short-term contract with Sydney FC in season one of the A-League. In 2008, he was in a head-to-head battle with fellow state-league veteran Shannon Cole for a permanent role with the Sky Blues, but lost out and retreated to Manly United, where he was captain for three years until he decided to come home to Hanwood FC.

'I did okay in football, I did enough to tell a story, but I missed a lot in my childhood – parties, weddings, birthdays, the lot. I was never here. I was pretty homesick. It was tough going, but it was what I had to do. You've got to be fairly dedicated. How many times I lived in different houses, got billeted out here, there and everywhere, living with strangers, travelling on planes and buses.

I'd been away a lot with the Joeys but being the only country kid left in the squad that didn't live in a big city, I was having to fly to Sydney, take connecting flights to Adelaide... especially leading up to the under-17s World Cup, there was a lot of training. I was away from months and months on end leading up to when I went to King's. But once I settled in, it was brilliant, and it gave me that springboard in Sydney.'

According to Football Queensland technical director David Abela, the reality is players will have to move to a big city sooner or later if they want to become professional footballers. In Abela's previous role as the coaching director for Far North Queensland, he saw first-hand the types of sacrifices young players and their families would make to achieve their dreams. 'They move their whole family sometimes. To uplift a whole family from friends, aunties, uncles, grandparents, and move completely to another environment... I think that's just massive,' Abela said. 'The parents recognise it and make those arrangements, and it amazes me. If the family doesn't move, these kids go to boarding school and they're on their own. What we've found with kids from regional areas is because of the amount of sacrifices they have to make, they understand they have to put the work in. If you're going to travel two hours for a training session, you're going to put the effort in. You're not going to walk around and not give 100%. Also they're well-disciplined in their study, how they conduct themselves, purely because of where they've come from. We find those type of issues are not issues for country kids. They're a lot more grounded.'

Michael Thwaite went through a similar experience, albeit in a much different part of the country to Griffith. Born in Brisbane, Thwaite's family moved to the wet tropics of Cairns when he was two. There, the 13-cap Socceroos defender grew up alongside another future professional, Zenon Caravella. The pair went to school together and came through the ranks at the Saints Soccer Club where they were coached by their fathers, who had little in

the way of experience or certification, but did so out of necessity. ‘I remember at school every day, we were playing. At home, every day, we were playing,’ Thwaite told *Leopold Method*. ‘I used to go down with Zenon, dribbling through trees and endless sessions like that, just us two – in the backyard, doing one-on-ones. We always made a conscious effort to do extra training. That’s the most important aspect when you’re not getting the training you probably need to in comparison to the better set-ups down south. The guys who make it to the highest level share that sort of story.’

While Caravella moved to Sydney when he was 12 for boarding school, Thwaite kept plying his trade at home, where he kept arriving at dead ends. He made his senior debut at 15 for Saints in the local competition, spent a brief time in an under-funded North Queensland Academy of Sport before it disbanded, and ended up following in Caravella’s footsteps when a scholarship allowed him the opportunity to study at Sydney University. That’s where the man who would become one of the A-League’s most reliable defenders was found by accident by former Socceroos boss Raul Blanco. Thwaite was playing for the university’s team in the NSW Super League, the state’s second tier, against Fraser Park one day when Blanco, then coach of Marconi, was pacing the sidelines. Blanco was actually on the lookout for Daniel Schwarzer – Mark’s brother – but Thwaite had a good game in attacking midfield, scored a couple of goals and caught his eye. Thwaite then trialled with Marconi and signed his first professional contract. From there he ventured overseas and spent time in Romania, Poland and Norway before coming home and hopping between three A-League clubs, all the while making sporadic appearances for the national team.

‘That was kind of it for me in the Queensland development program. If I didn’t make that move to Sydney there’s no way I would have been spotted in Cairns,’ Thwaite said. ‘But the game is very opinionated, and you’ve just got to find the right opinion. That’s why I moved to Sydney, because I believed in myself. I was lucky though, because it made me tougher mentally, not making it

through the traditional way. That's probably why I'm still playing now. A lot of the game is mental. Australia produces very, very good athletes but it's that mental side that plays such a huge part. The players coming from regional areas, having a tougher pathway makes you stronger. Having a good attitude, respecting people and believing in yourself – they're massive aspects of the game.'

If a player like Thwaite almost went through the system undetected, it's not inconceivable to imagine that football has missed out in an immense amount of talent in regional Australia over the years, whether it be due to poor identification processes or a failure to properly nurture quality juniors. 'I think we're a good ten to fifteen years behind country development than AFL and league,' Schirripa said. 'I think that's because they put in place an identification and talent system years and years ago. I remember Canberra Raiders would come out here to pick up players. Even Group 20, the rugby league comp here, and those sort of competitions have been far more professional than soccer comps. Now, finally, they are becoming better and better. You'll find in the next ten years a lot more country footballers will be playing professionally. Football is starting to realise there is a lot of talent in the country and they're accommodating for that now, which is very important. We're not as isolated.'

Thwaite believes there were players around him when he was growing up that could have made it as well, had they been pointed in the right direction. 'I guess when I was coming through, a lot less was shown about technique. It was more about the physical, how fast you were, how big you were,' Thwaite said. 'Coaches told me I was too small and too slow. Now I'd probably be one of the tallest and the quickest for a defender. I always knew I had the right aspects to be a professional player but some coaches didn't see that when I was growing up. But I still think the coaching at a grassroots level needs to be a lot better, and they're working on that. When you've got guys who know about formation and

emulating teams in Europe with good technical advice, you can't lose. Now, players are heavily reliant on technique, and the game in Australia has evolved as well.'

Abela agrees that the landscape is changing, and key to it all is coach education. That's what dominates his agenda when he travels through Queensland, trying to sell the National Football Curriculum and entice coaches at community level to buy into the vision. It's a hard enough job in the cities, given how expensive FFA's courses are, and after you add in the travel factor for those in the most remote areas of the country, it becomes near impossible. Yet Abela insists it's the only way the game will go forward. 'It's like anything. If you've got a product, it needs to be something that the kids coming in will enjoy,' he said. 'Central to that is the people who run those programs. If you have the right program and the right coaching, players will develop and get identified. There's probably a lot [in the past] who went to a certain level and stopped. That could be because they're from a family that owns a farm, or cost wise, or maybe there wasn't a suitable program for them. But the NPL now, in the regional areas, gives them that exposure so they can stay in those regional areas, go to uni or school at home, and still play at a good level.'

But with any form of change comes a natural force of resistance, and for regional football, it has moved in both directions. Coaches and clubs are always keen to improve but actually making it happen is a challenge in itself, Abela has found. For decades, volunteers have put their heart and soul into building football clubs and crafting talented youngsters into quality first-grade players. Now, all of a sudden, they find themselves being told by the new breed in charge of the state federations that they need expensive badges to prove their value. 'There's a new focus on regional areas,' he said. 'But it's a two-way street. If they're asking for services, maybe that's an area we need to work harder on – getting them to understand that the key to going forward is coaching. We've got

to lift the standards. There's a willingness to go forward but when it comes to the actual work, they realise it's not easy. What the community clubs don't understand, and maybe we haven't done a good job of delivering this, is that not every player is going to continue in the NPL. Some will come out and go back into those local leagues, and it'll help them too. We're saying to them, come in and do the advanced courses. Lift your level, because it will help you as time goes on, and kids will stay in the game longer.'

The resistance of football's city-based powerbrokers to help the regional game, however, is much stronger than any stubbornness on the bush's part to change, and this has undoubtedly stifled development over the years. Most state league competitions are state leagues in name only. Generally the teams involved all come from metropolitan areas, and the travel between each is minimal. The National Premier Leagues revolution was intended to make elite pathways more accessible for regional players, yet you could almost count the regional teams in the NPL system on one hand. In Western Australia and South Australia, the clubs are clustered around Perth and Adelaide. It is the same in New South Wales with Sydney, although that could change if the likes of Nowra-based Southern Branch FC or the Western NSW Mariners in Bathurst ever win promotion to the top tier. Northern NSW Football's situation is the most intriguing. The body was formed in 1884 to cater for football's explosion in the northern part of the state, but the teams in that federation's NPL are all Newcastle-based, despite strong soccer communities in Tamworth, Lismore and Coffs Harbour, the latter which hosts the annual FFA National Youth Championships.

The case of NPL Victoria is telling as to how little city clubs care for the plight of regional football. The slow and painful birth of the competition was complicated by Football Federation Victoria's insistence on regional representation in the top flight – something the established order of Melbourne-based clubs resisted. For some, no matter the potential advantages, allowing a brand new team to waltz straight into the state's highest level rather than climb their way through the state's football pyramid was an insult, and a costly

one at that. Regardless, the Goulburn Valley Suns and Ballarat Red Devils were rushed in, underprepared for the inevitable baptism of fire that awaited them and it came as no surprise when they were relegated to the second-tier NPL1 at the end of the season. Many clubs savoured the schadenfreude.

Queensland may boast the only truly statewide NPL that includes teams from all areas, not just capital cities. The inclusion of the Northern Fury and Far North Queensland Heat show a desire to include regional areas in the big picture. The Rockhampton-based Central Queensland FC Energy might have collapsed, but Football Queensland is planning to roll out NPL operations in Mackay and Wide Bay. Yet it wasn't always thus. The NPL is Queensland's third incarnation of a state league structure. Most recently, the Queensland State League was established in 2008 but lasted only five years before it collapsed in a heap. The very first attempt came way back in 1979, just two years after the creation of the National Soccer League. Teams from regional Queensland were not only included, they thrived. Townsville Kern United often attracted crowds in the thousands to the Townsville Sports Reserve during what many remember as the golden age of football in the north. In 1982, they won the double, taking out both the league title and the Ampol Cup, but at the end of that year the state competition folded. A power bloc of clubs in the south-east had made their distaste for the huge travel demands known in the seasons prior, and in the end they returned to their local competitions. The lesson here is that for regional football to thrive, the cities need to lend a helping hand.

Abela was recently in Canberra, talking to his fellow state technical directors about the NPL and how Queensland is able to deal with such vast distances between clubs. 'They were asking us how the hell we do it,' he said. 'We do it because the regional areas are well-organised. It's just the way we're set up. We've made it holistic rather than metro-based and we've opened up the door

for them. There is expense involved, but it seems like Townsville and Cairns have sorted themselves in regards to that, and they get some assistance in travel and funding. Yes, there are burdens in regards to finance, but why call it a National Premier League if you don't include them?'

The more regional teams that enter state competitions, the better off the game will be. This year, Griffith formed a team in the NSW Regional League known as the Riverina Rhinos, which competed against various Sydney metropolitan teams in four grades from under-12s to under-15s. Pox name aside, the Rhinos were a revelation with three teams finishing top of the table and the other coming second. Football NSW has encouraged Griffith to enter a senior men's and under-20s team in the fourth rung of NSW football, State League 2, next year, regardless of whether Sydney clubs kick up a stink about the six-hour drive they may face for away games. 'These kids are getting together three nights a week in Griffith now, training like how the kids in the city train,' Schirripa said. 'They're all getting proper training, coaching and all the bits and pieces you need. We never had that. There were kids that had raw talent but hadn't been groomed yet. You didn't learn the fundamentals as a footballer as you do today. It disadvantaged a lot of country kids. The country is a fantastic breeding ground. Kids here are getting more personal training, it's definitely more hands-on. They're not getting washed away with such big groups. There's probably less distractions in the country as well, so they can zone in on their football a little better.'

Years after his spell with the Australian under-17s side, Schirripa found out the real reason why he was cut from the Joeys squad just prior to the World Cup. The powers that be deemed it too difficult and too expensive to organise his travel from Griffith to the various training camps, so he had to go. 'The coach at the time of the NSW Academy back then got a payment for every player he got in, and a player from there took my spot. This guy cashed in, he got his

fifth player in and I got bombed,' Schirripa said. It was a crushing discovery for a player whose career was defined by sliding door moments, and one that speaks to the heart of the testy relationship between the regions and the cities in Australian football.

But there is change in the wind – a renewed focus, as Abela put it. When FFA tries to shoehorn regional clubs into state competitions, they are trying to make up for lost time. With the spread of the National Football Curriculum and the ever-increasing certification standards required of grassroots coaching, they are trying to fix the problems that have lingered for decades. By taking pre-season games and A-League fixtures to the bush, they are trying to establish some sort of foothold. FFA should be credited for their attempts to engage with regional areas over the last few years. The A-League has led the AFL and NRL with the introduction of the 'Regional Round' during the season proper, and it is significant that a sport previously ignorant of rural Australia has bothered to roll the dice. None of those fixtures were hitch-free, but matches have been held in places like Morwell, Bathurst, Albury, Port Macquarie and Launceston. Even the member federations have followed suit, with the FFSA this year taking NPL games to Whyalla, Roxby Downs and Mount Gambier.

Token gestures they may seem to those for whom top-level football is so readily accessible, but these initiatives make a real difference. Memories are made when children see their heroes in the flesh, and such experiences are what encourage kids to select their preferred code, or inspire them to attempt to make a career from the game. 'I think it's essential for the A-League clubs to come out to regional areas,' Abela said. 'It's like you can touch them. They're close by, they're training, the kids can go and watch them and be right next to the stars they see on TV week in, week out. Even getting close to the coaches is important for local coaches, to see that what they do at their local clubs isn't so different to what they do at the top level.'

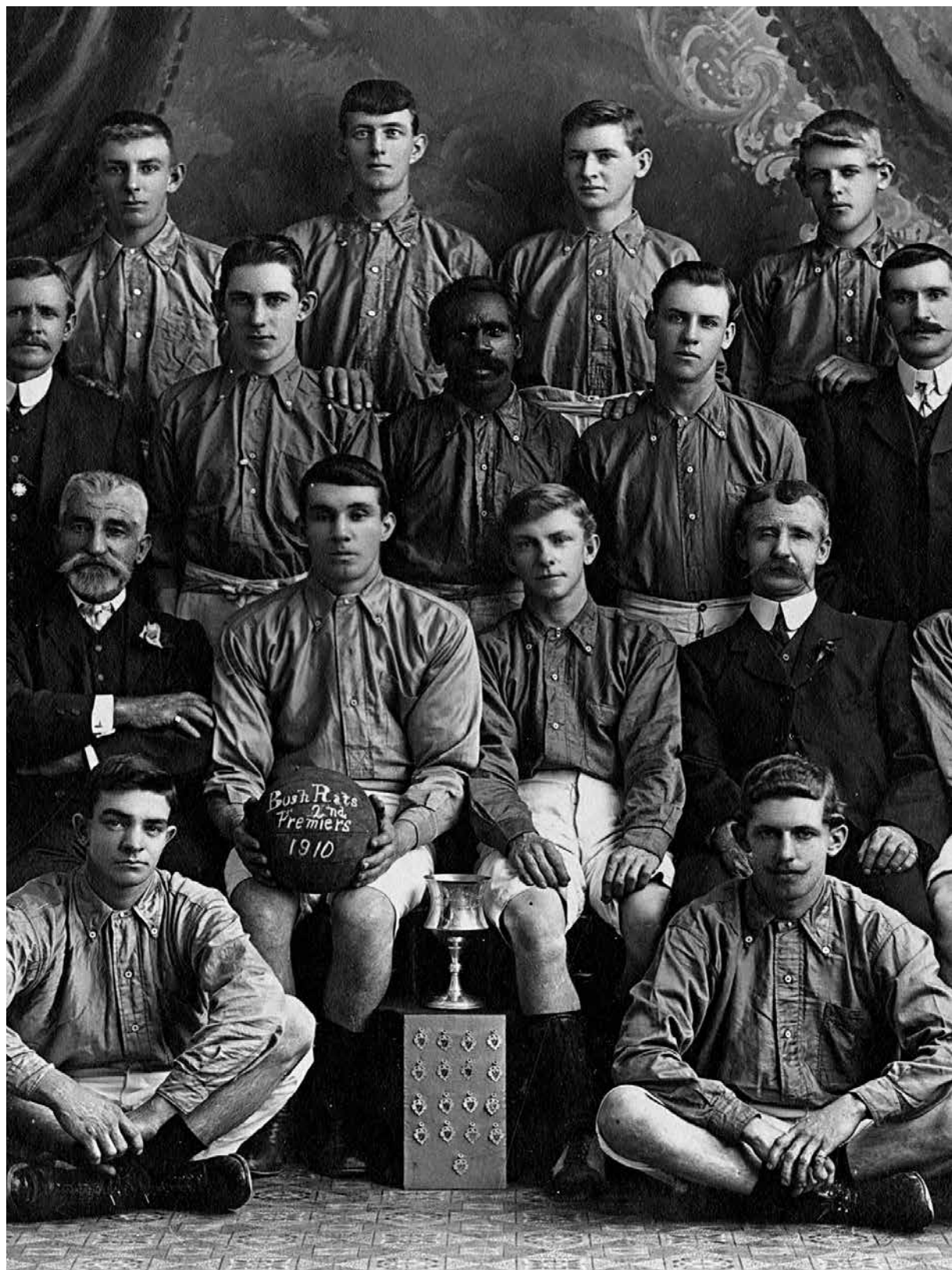
All it takes is one moment to change a life. Long before he became a legend at Melbourne Victory, Archie Thompson was playing amateur football for Bathurst '75 while working as a kitchenhand in a Chinese restaurant. After spending time alongside the likes of Harry Kewell and Brett Emerton in the NSW Academy, he was on course to becoming yet another unrealised talent, or in his words, a bum. 'I was about to turn seventeen, working in the restaurant one night, washing dishes and thinking about whatever it was I thought about in those days,' Thompson wrote in his autobiography, *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger*. 'I happened to glance up at the little television they had installed in the kitchen, and there was Harry. He was in the United Kingdom, starring for Leeds United. I watched him motoring down a wing, no doubt well paid and having a great time on his way to superstardom. I was up to my elbows in soap suds and grease.' That moment jolted Thompson back into action. He cleaned himself up, got himself fit and into form, won a contract with the Morwell Falcons – the NSL's only true regional team – and forged a long, successful career. He even got to play next to Kewell again at Melbourne Victory for a season.

Thwaite's hero growing up was Brisbane Strikers star Frank Farina, the greatest player to have come from Far North Queensland. Fortunately for Thwaite, proximity to his idol was not an issue, as Farina is Caravella's uncle. Every time they crossed paths, Thwaite would feel a little kick that would encourage him to pursue his dreams of becoming a professional footballer. If his mate's uncle could do it, so could he. 'Frank was an icon from the region, and I was just obsessed with him and the Strikers,' Thwaite said. 'That was the first team I supported, the first jersey I ever bought, and through Zenon I knew him. My debut for Marconi was actually against Brisbane Strikers. In those days, the Strikers had their talent pool in Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton... now, it's a little bit concerning, but hopefully what teams like the Heat and the Fury are trying to do in building from the ground up can work.'

Only time will tell. At the very least, an effort is being made. FFA knows football has undervalued the contribution of rural

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Australia in the past, and is now trying to lay down the foundations for the future. Given the width and breadth of this country and the mass of different opinions that populate every football community, that's an incredible challenge. But if those driving the change can emulate the perseverance and determination shown by regional football over the years, they might just have a shot. Perhaps soon the tyranny will lose grip.



A LACK OF DREAMING TRACKS: WHY BLACKFELLAS DON'T PLAY SOCCER

IAN SYSON

KICK-TO-KICK OR HACKY SACK? CLAIMING THE FIRST AUSTRALIANS

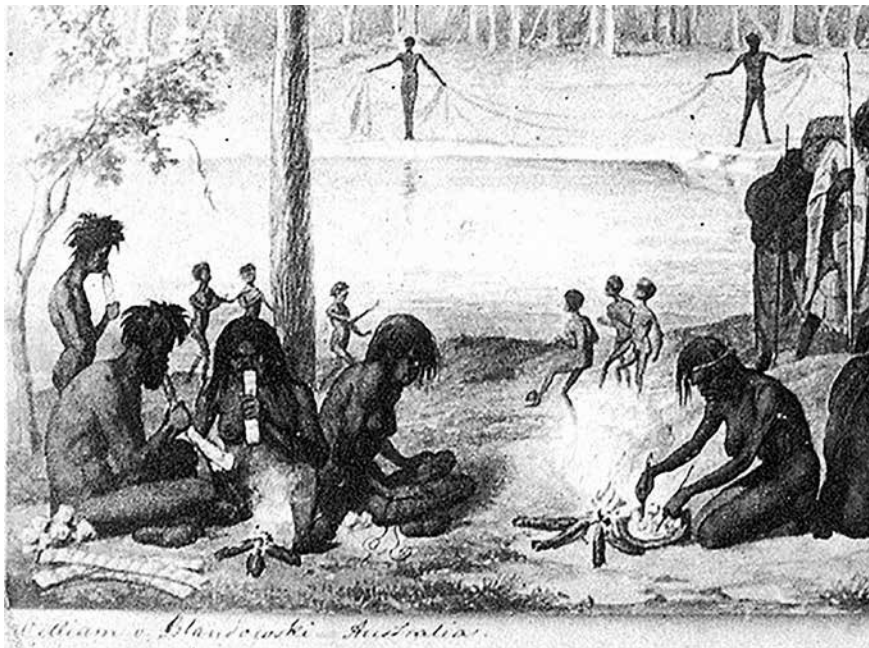
IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT AUSTRALIA IS THE MOST COMPETITIVE sporting marketplace in the world. With four football codes – Australian Rules football, rugby league, rugby union and soccer – competing for spectators, players and a place in the Australian national imagination, origins matter. To state origins is to stake a sense of belonging. To state origins is to mark territory in both time and space.

The following etching by Gustav Mützel is a rare pictorial representation of Indigenous people playing football. It has been the source of much debate about the kind of football it represents. These arguments are part of what have been labeled ‘The Football History Wars.’ In 2007, the CEO of Museum Victoria, Dr Patrick Green, told

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the *Age* newspaper that Mützel's etching 'could be the first image of football in Australia.' Green, of course, was referring to Australian Rules football:

I was looking at the image with my colleagues for different reasons entirely, and suddenly it struck me. Those kids are playing footy! It looks just like the games of 'kick-to-kick' we used to play in the school yard. Look at that guy: it seems like he's preparing to take a mark.



Etching by Gustav Mützel 1857 depicting what may be Australia's first football game

There is a long tradition of lionising the indigeneity of Australian Rules. Writers such as Geoffrey Blainey, Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner, Robert Hess and Bob Stewart have written long and eloquently of the vital contribution Australian Rules football

has made to Australian life. Through their work they argue that Australian Rules is *the* indigenous and national game.

More recently, influenced by the work of Jim Poulter, Martin Flanagan and others, a younger set of critics has begun to entrench the even more spectacular notion that Australian Rules has Aboriginal origins and is therefore an *Indigenous* game. Historian Gillian Hibbins called this a 'seductive myth' in 2008.

'It has now become popular to imagine that Australian Rules has its roots not in Australia's imperial past but within its native Aboriginal culture,' wrote football historian Tony Collins. Citing the English Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, he argues that the invention of Aboriginal origins for Australian rules has the role of 'establishing or symbolising social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities' and 'legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority.' For the AFL, it plays a crucial role in 'authenticating its claim to be Australia's true national football code.'

Are the men in Mützel's etching playing Australian Rules football? In order to make his argument Green needs to ignore three factors. First, because it was engraved in Germany well after the events it portrayed, the image is mediated across a complex of time, space, language and culture and is therefore an unreliable representation. Secondly, William Blandowski's 1857 notes on Aboriginal life – on which this etching is based – describe the game he observed thus: 'The ball is made with Typha roots; it is not thrown or hit with a bat, but it is kicked up in the air with the foot. Aim of the game: never let the ball touch the ground.'

Thirdly, in the actual visual representation of the etching, the boys in the middle background are participating in an activity that might resemble hacky-sack or keepy-uppy, games that have more to do with soccer than Australian Rules.

Indeed, it also resembles more the game as described in 1901 by anthropologist SCR Bowler in an essay, *Aboriginal Customs*,

Bogan and Lachlan River Aborigines:

One person kicks the ball up in the air, and then there is a general scramble to see who can kick it again before it touches the ground; the main object is to keep the ball from doing so, if it does, however do so, they start afresh.

The game named *woggabaliri* in the Australian Sports Commission's guide to Aboriginal games seems to have been informed by the same practice. *Woggabaliri* was played in areas of central and southern New South Wales with a ball made of possum fur, and the name was taken from the Wiradyuri language for 'play'. It is described by the Australian Sports Commission as 'a cooperative kicking volley game to see how many times the ball can be kept in the air before contacting the ground,' and needing 'great agility and suppleness of limbs to play with any degree of skill.'

From this evidence, an argument could be mounted that some Aboriginal people first played a game more resembling soccer before they ever played Australian Rules. This argument would be crowned by the fact that in June 2009 a team of young Aboriginal players from Mildura in Victoria played in the national Aboriginal soccer titles under the name of *Marngrook Meenteel* (Football Stars).

However, these arguments are futile and probably offensive. This article does not seek to claim Aboriginal games as soccer any more than claim them for Australian Rules football. Rather than trying to locate Aboriginal people at the mythic origins of the game, it is a much more constructive proposition to investigate the actual contribution they have made to the game of soccer. And while soccer has not had the same level as engagement with Indigenous Australians as Australian Rules football or rugby league, but there remains an important story to be told. While it

is a story of opportunity and inclusiveness, it is also ultimately one of neglect.

NEEDLES IN THE HAYSTACK: BONDI AND QUILP

The only substantial uncovered evidence of Aboriginal participation in soccer before the 1950s is in the stories of two men: W. ‘Bondi’ Neal and Quilp. Neal played as a goalkeeper on the New South Wales South Coast and the Northern coal fields of the Hunter Valley for nearly ten years between 1903 and 1912, while Quilp played occasionally for the Dinmore Bush Rats in the Ipswich competition in 1904.

Neal came to prominence in 1909 when he played for a South Maitland representative team against a touring Western Australian side. Despite his heroic efforts in goal the team lost 2-0. In his 2012 book *The Aboriginal Soccer Tribe: A History of Aboriginal Involvement in the World Game*, John Maynard records that around 1912 ‘he left the coalfields for his native South Coast’, and from here, he disappears from the record. ‘Neal is certainly the most famous early Aboriginal soccer player,’ wrote Maynard. ‘But whatever became of this legendary player has disappeared from both the archives and memory.’

This notion of disappearance resonates across Indigenous history and soccer history alike. The tendency of Aboriginal subjects and soccer moments to recede from view means that researching the history of Aboriginal soccer players is like searching for a needle in a haystack. Fortunately the recent developments in digital and searchable archives have shifted the odds a little in favour of finding the needle. For example, the following photograph of the Dinmore Bush Rats was found in the Trove pictorial archive. It is as mysterious as it is exciting. Bang in the middle is an Aboriginal man. He is named as ‘Quilp’ and his presence in the photograph sends a frisson through the settled histories of football in Australia.



Dinmore Bush Rats, 2nd Premiers, Ipswich, 1910 (courtesy Picture Ipswich, Fassifern Historical Society)

As is the way in the discovery of Aboriginal participation in Australian soccer, many questions are raised by this startling image. Who is Quilp? Where is he from? How does he come to be playing British Association Football? Why is he positioned in the middle of the photograph? Why the Dickensian name?

Evidence from the *Brisbane Courier* reveals that a player named Quilp turned out for the Reliance team from Dinmore on May 28, 1904. This is in all likelihood the same player as Quilp from 1910. Confusingly, the report suggests the Quilp was sent off for backchat before scoring the winning goal, which became the subject of a protest.

Quilp's goal for Reliance could be the first recorded goal by a senior Aboriginal soccer player, although it is also possible that as a forward, Quilp may have scored a few before that. Indeed Quilp was a man of many talents, playing competitive quoits in 1908 and boxing as a featherweight in 1909. In 1919 an Aboriginal man

named Quilp was employed as a shooter by a noted buffalo hunter, Patrick Cahill. As reported in the *Queenslander*:

His horse fell and Quilp rolled clear of him. Unfortunately for him, the buffalo was heading straight for him, his head down, its nostrils distended, and its eyes full of murder. Quilp fortunately retained his presence of mind, and when the furious animal was within a foot or so of him, rolled on one side, that escaping by a hair's breadth. Had the animal struck him he would certainly have met a terrible death.

The archives also suggest Quilp may have acted as a referee, surely one of the first Indigenous Australians to officiate in any senior sport. In 1919 a correspondent to the *Queensland Times* wondered where a figure named 'Quelp' had got to. In doing so he triangulated some evidential loose ends. He noted Quilp's buffalo hunting exploits but also revealed his one-time residence in Dinmore and his 'fame' as a soccer figure. The *Queensland Times* reporter also suggests Quilp was an all-round sportsman and competent across physical activities. As a winger on the soccer field, and with the possibility he was named after a racehorse, we might assume that he was a speedy runner, intelligent, decisive and able. But this is merely speculation and deduction from circumstantial evidence. There are so few concrete facts to present.

It would be folly to consider, even for a moment, that these two brief portraits represent anything more than oddities. To see them as a pattern or even as a faint outline of one might be to imagine too much solidity. While it is tempting for the soccer historian to create useful and convenient myths about the early Aboriginal involvement in Australian soccer, to suggest that Aboriginal players had any kind of substantial contribution would be an argument too far. It is important to recognise their involvement, though it is of equal importance that the role of Quilp and Bondi Neal in the game's history are not exaggerated and fetishised. They remain, for now, fleeting glimpses of early Aboriginal involvement in soccer.

THE HOLY TRINITY

In the early 1950s, a young Aboriginal soccer player started to be noticed in Queensland. In July 1952, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that James Mulgrave, then 19, was being courted by a first grade soccer club in Bankstown. The president of the Bankstown club had watched Mulgrave playing first grade for Blair Athol in Queensland, and was sufficiently impressed by his play at centre half to invite him to Sydney. 'Mulgrave became just one of "two or three" Indigenous players in twenty years to play first grade soccer in New South Wales,' reported the *Herald*.

The article raises many questions: who were the 'two or three' other Aboriginal players in the period outlined? Were there Aboriginal players in other regions at other times? What is the process by which James Mulgrave, an Aboriginal player from inland Central Queensland, came to be playing first grade soccer in Queensland in 1952? What happened to Mulgrave, who, like Neal before him, seems to have disappeared from the record?

Around this time another young Aboriginal soccer player started to be noticed in South Australia. Maynard writes: 'Charlie Perkins was a first grade soccer player at the age of fifteen, playing with Port Thistle.' Over the next five years his stocks improved to the point where he was awarded the South Australian Player of the Year. Maynard asserts that Perkins was known as one of the better wing-halves in the country. Indeed it is now well-known that Charlie Perkins played soccer at the elite level in Australia. He trialed for First Division clubs in England in 1957 before playing a season with Bishop Auckland, one of England's great amateur sides. His time there helped him form his attitude toward football. 'I play the game hard, the way I was taught with Bishop Auckland in England,' wrote Perkins in his autobiography *A Bastard Like Me*. 'After all soccer is a man's game. But I play it fair and don't go in for the dirty, niggling tactics of some players.'

But while Perkins was a genuine star of the game he is probably remembered as a curiosity, without context, an exception

that proves the rule. Perkins was a prominent Aboriginal activist and bureaucrat and his game of choice might be explained away, if explained at all, via allusion to his radical political orientation and his status as a maverick. Well he may have been a maverick but he was not the only one.

Two other Aboriginal players of Perkins' generation also had remarkable careers, first as soccer players and then in Aboriginal culture and politics. John Moriarty was the first Indigenous man to be selected for Australia and Gordon Briscoe followed in Perkins' footsteps, playing for two seasons in England. What makes this story all the more remarkable is that these three young men knew each other intimately.

Gordon Briscoe's 2010 memoir, *Racial Folly: a Memoir of a Twentieth Century Family* is a startling revelation of locus of Aboriginal participation in the world game. Born in 1938, Briscoe is best known for his prominence as an Aboriginal activist. *Racial Folly* outlines the struggles, sadness and joys involved in that journey, but it also contains a remarkable diversion into an Aboriginal soccer subculture of mildly staggering proportions, not so much in its breadth as in its sheer depth of quality. Out of one institution, Father Smith's home for boys of mixed Aboriginal descent, came a remarkable number of talented Indigenous players.

Briscoe, Charlie and Ernie Perkins, John Moriarty and Jerry Hill began their soccer careers together at Port Adelaide Thistle. Newly promoted, Thistle urgently needed more playing fields (and junior players), and according to Briscoe, the club 'approached Father Smith for permission to rent a large field in the front area of St Francis House owned by the Church.' Eventually, 'the house boys filled the junior team and Charlie... made the colts. From the beginning Charlie was a natural, as were many in the junior side, particularly Moriarty (Baggy) and Hill (Skrulyet).'

Significantly, many of the boys in Briscoe's circle also played Australian Rules football and some of them rugby league for

a Semaphore Colts team. Wally McArthur ended up playing rugby league for Australia. In fact the boys participated in many physical activities that strengthened their bonds, and it was these bonds that helped Briscoe cope when their mentor Father Smith left in 1950.

It was Perkins who influenced Briscoe and Moriarty to lean towards soccer. 'Charlie had great talent in both codes,' wrote Briscoe, 'but I believe that he chose to excel at soccer as a way of evading the bullies at the House and as a way of venting his frustrations at Father Smith's leaving. He also resented the prejudice he confronted by those who played and organised Aussie Rules.' This is confirmed in Perkins' autobiography. He writes of Port Thistle:

They treated me like a human being. That was where I first felt free, when I began to play soccer. The team would talk roughly to me and I would know where I stood. Soccer was the only thing that enabled me to put up with my job. The Soccer Club became my home and I found a new security in my ability to play well. I found some friends in soccer. Most of all, I found a place where I could be somebody. I could play soccer better than most people and was improving all the time. I played one year junior, then senior at fifteen, and after that I played first division right through the rest of my professional soccer career.

Like Perkins and Briscoe, soccer also gave Moriarty a refuge from the culture of racism. 'The culture of soccer enabled me to move out of that system that we were brought up in, you know, that totally racist system, being a second-class citizen and Aboriginal under differing laws and we had to live with it,' he explained in Maynard's *The Aboriginal Soccer Tribe*.

Briscoe played both soccer and Australian rules at senior level. 'When I went to Souths I knew many of the white players who

worked for the railway and got on well with them,' he wrote. 'I was certainly more interested in girls and I was particularly interested in the migrant women who followed soccer. My weekends were busy; I played cricket or Aussie rules on Saturdays and soccer on Sundays.'

Briscoe was confronted with a milder form of racial prejudice as well as a touch of soccerphobia when he started a new job at Port Lincoln. He describes how a co-worker said he must be able to play Australian Rules because he was 'a Blackfella'. When Briscoe told his colleagues he wanted to play soccer, he was told it was a 'Sheila's game' and told to stick to footy.

But Briscoe chose soccer. He played his last game of Australian Rules for Exeter in 1959, before returning to play for Beograd at Norwood Oval in the summer. Perkins had recently returned from playing in England and convinced Briscoe to join Croatia in the first division in the winter season. The fact that Briscoe was paid for scoring goals probably influenced the decision to continue playing soccer.

Briscoe steadily improved as a player, moving from Croatia to Polonia before deciding in 1961 to follow in Perkins' footsteps and try his luck in England. After playing with Hemel Hempstead and Preston North End's lower grades Briscoe suffered injuries and started to suspect that he did not have what was needed to make the grade in professional football in England. 'As the winter drew on I became more and more fearful that I would injure myself,' he wrote of the experience. 'My confidence was plummeting. I stuck it out in Hemel for that winter and moved to Preston in mid-1962.' Playing at Hemel Hempstead led Briscoe to meet his wife to be Norma at a local dance hall. They were married in autumn 1962, just a few months after meeting.

At this point in the narrative, the game recedes from view and Briscoe gets a job in factory before returning to Australia with Norma and his 12-month-old baby Aaron in 1964. Charlie Perkins had moved to Sydney to attend university and play with Pan Hellenic and was still there when Briscoe decided to come home.

Perkins asked Briscoe to come to Sydney to participate in a new phase in their lives, Aboriginal activism.

Soccer then leaves Briscoe's life and his subsequent remembrance of it. In this regard, *Racial Folly* offers a model of the way soccer disappears from view in so many other representations of the game in Australian history. Indeed in the foreword to *The Aboriginal Soccer Tribe*, Briscoe explains that 'soccer could not support a wife and family so the alternative was work by day and study by night.' Yet this necessity does not explain the near-complete cutting of soccer from the narrative of *Racial Folly*. Even if soccer were practically absent from Briscoe's life, it would have been with his thoughts and a subject of discussion from time to time, especially when he was so closely connected with Perkins.

Soccer makes a late comeback in *Racial Folly* when it is mentioned in relation to Briscoe's grown children who, like their father and Perkins and Moriarty before them, use sport as important building blocks for their lives. Briscoe's children Aaron, John and Lisa all played representative sports and were natural sportspeople adept in soccer, rugby, hockey and cricket. They are a reminder of the special group of young Aboriginal men in Semaphore showing a sporting flexibility that enabled them to move easily and gracefully between football codes, something that enables them to take up soccer but makes them equally able to leave the game when the pressures of other sports and politics come to bear.

Briscoe claims in his foreword that the game has 'forgotten Aboriginal people in its zest for self-development.' He reminds readers that soccer in Port Adelaide relied on Aboriginal participation at a certain moment in time.

Individual clubs such as Port Thistle blindly supported us because, without us it would not have existed. Dominated by cricket and Australian rules, migrants had to beg for

playing space and were targeted by Australia's press. What brought us few players to soccer was often the fact that our skills were transferred from Aussie rules when we were driven away from that code. We chose migrants because they respected us.

It was a rare moment because a number of factors came into play in leading Aboriginal players towards soccer: excellent and adaptable Aboriginal sportsmen; truly remarkable individuals; generous and welcoming soccer hosts whose own desire for belonging provided a reciprocal inclusiveness for Aboriginal players; and an Australian Rules structure that was often exclusive and racist towards Indigenous Australians. Briscoe says that when 'we look to the future of Aboriginal people in soccer it is easy to be optimistic, but . . . the time is now ripe for the FFA to provide the support and the framework in which the passionate advocates and players of Indigenous soccer can succeed.'

It is a warning, gentle and well-intended, that soccer needs to remember the spirit of inclusiveness at the heart of the Port Thistle story. Because it is one that speaks of dire consequences should it not be heeded Australian soccer authorities. A permanent breach between Indigenous sports people and Australian soccer would impoverish the game and limit its potential.

OPPORTUNITY AND NEGLECT

One of the most telling points of Maynard's book is when Harry Williams – the first Aboriginal Australian to play in a FIFA World Cup and the most capped Indigenous Soccerroo – explains that it was not the legendary stories of the trinity of Perkins, Moriarty and Briscoe that encouraged him to play the game. While he eventually came to know of them, as soccer men and political activists, his was the much less heroic but no less splendid story of being 'exposed to soccer by a friend across the street at six years of

age.’ Williams says, ‘it was just a question of circumstances. It just happened.’ Yet, just as with Perkins, Briscoe and Moriarty, there was pressure from another football code. Williams grew up in St George rugby league territory in Sydney and the St George great and family friend, Billy Smith, kept pestering him to shift codes. Smith ‘always said to stop playing that sissy game and come to play rugby league.’ Like the trinity before him he resisted and found solace in the genuine acceptance of the migrant communities that welcomed him into soccer.

In the early 1970s, history seemed to repeat once more when yet another young Aboriginal soccer player emerged in South Australia. Lancelot ‘Buddy’ Newchurch, born in Whyalla in the mid-1950s, managed to break through further than most Aboriginal players. But his is also the saddest story.

In 1971, at the age of 16, Newchurch was spotted playing in Whyalla by Chelsea’s assistant manager Ron Suart, who was in Australia with the touring English FA team. Suart invited the young man to Chelsea for a trial, and his family and community raised £500 (today’s approximate equivalent is \$14,000) to get him to England. Newchurch spent three months away and the narrative arc is not clear. Some reporters suggest he simply did not make the grade, whereas others write about his having some potential but being unable to fight off the homesickness and loneliness. His story brings to mind the experiences of fellow South Australians, Perkins, Briscoe and Moriarty. Was their advice sought about the wisdom of sending him over so young?

That Newchurch returned home without success is hardly surprising. The idea of a lone 16-year-old Aboriginal boy leaving Whyalla for the pressure cooker of professional football in the English autumn of 1971 seems like a recipe for loneliness, despair and inevitable retreat. Trialling with Chelsea in the shadows cast by giants like Peter Bonetti, Peter Osgood and Alan Hudson, only the strongest of the strong could possibly compete and survive.

Like many such narratives of Aboriginal soccer players this one also is truncated, though not because, as might have been suspected, he was disillusioned, or simply went hard too early and burnt out young and faded away. Indeed, Newchurch kept playing the game and in his late twenties was making an adequate living and maintaining a strong reputation in the sometimes lucrative semi-professional leagues around Whyalla and Port Pirie. In many ways his was a story of continuity and relative success.

Tragically, Newchurch was murdered, bashed to death outside the Westlands Hotel, Whyalla in 1982, a crime that remains unsolved. Not only was his death a personal tragedy for him and his family and community, it was also a tragedy for a game that could ill afford to lose and forget its Indigenous exemplars. Even though it is an atypical story, its grim and cruel ending seems to intimate something important at the heart of soccer's relationship to Aboriginality in Australia. It is a relationship in need of healing.

The healing process will be of enormous value. Healing requires authenticity and truth-telling. It opens debate on power and responsibility and it requires a new understanding of the past and consequently of the present and the future. In the process Australian soccer will need to confront the fact that at one point in the 1950s there were more Aboriginal men playing first-grade soccer in Adelaide than there were playing elite Australian Rules in Melbourne. And while the numbers were low and volatile and perhaps statistically anomalous they nonetheless represented a march stolen on the so-called 'indigenous' game. Australian soccer needs to remember why this was the case and work out how to tell the story.

A LOST GENERATION

Sean Gorman's *Legends: The AFL Indigenous Team of the Century* is a collection of interviews with the players selected in the best Aboriginal team over the history of Australian Rules football. It tells the stories of their personal connections with the game, and in so doing it also reveals a broader story about Aboriginality and sport.

Gorman's interviews follow a template. Each interviewee is asked a similar set of questions, one of which is about their formative sporting experiences. A great sense of sporting diversity emerges in the answers, with rugby league, cricket, basketball, athletics and boxing all playing a role in the sporting development of many of these players.

Four of the 22 players interviewed identified soccer as part of their sporting development. Adelaide Crows midfielder Andrew McLeod played soccer in Darwin, along with a wide range of other sports. West Coast Eagles forward Chris Lewis played soccer at Christ Church Grammar School in Perth, where he obtained a scholarship. 'I played a bit of soccer,' he says. 'Back then it was a bit like the ethnics played that and we played footy but you know as a kid you just got into anything.'

Another Eagles player, Peter Matera, also played soccer, influenced by his Italian father who played goalkeeper for a local club in Wagin in Western Australia. Matera claims:

Because Dad had played soccer and I used to watch him playing soccer I thought I would try it; he was a goalie. Footy was the main sport and I used to get told off at school about playing soccer. We had a new teacher and he was soccer mad and a few of my mates said, 'Let's put ourselves down and play in the soccer team.' The school football side then started getting beaten and the headmaster said, 'If you don't get into footy and play in the footy side you're going to have a hard time.' I said, 'I don't care.'

Given that Matera seemed not to buckle under those kinds of threats, it is a shame that Gorman's project does not encourage him to tease out the reasons why he eventually makes the shift to Australian Rules. It could be the 'ethnic' dimension. It could be peer or social pressure. The reader is left to assume a sense of inevitability in the eventual transition.

The most telling case, however, is the story of Adam Goodes. His is a transition that *is* explained. Influenced by his circle of white friends, Goodes had never played Australian Rules until he was thirteen, playing soccer until that time. The turning point came when his family moved to Merbein, just outside of Mildura.

Mum was the biggest thing that directed me into AFL. The only reason I swapped to AFL was when I went to play for a local soccer team Merbein up in Mildura, we went down to the local soccer fields. There was no junior teams, [it] was all seniors. So I would have been a 13-year-old Indigenous boy trying to knock around with all these Italian men. Across the field they happened to be playing AFL and Mum suggested that I give it a go. There seemed to be a lot of kids running around there and I was a lot taller and bigger than those kids. It just fitted for me.

Evidence suggests that junior soccer was in fact available to Goodes in Mildura at this time had he chosen to play. Indeed, this moment is two years after the time that Chris Tsivoglu and others from the Mildura United club started to encourage Aboriginal children and teenagers in the Mildura region to play soccer as a means of giving them some options and training. In 2006, Claire Halliday, wrote an article about Mildura United in the *Age*.

Mildura United began as a Greek club in 1916 [sic]. But that changed in 1992, when its current president, Chris Tsivoglou, got out of his car in the main street of Merbein to confront bored Koori kids throwing rocks at his car. An older relative stood up to him. Mr Tsivoglou asked the

man whether he could teach the young vandals ball skills so they did not waste their time. The man agreed. Now the young vandals are successful, law-abiding men.

Goodes' explanation does not seem to tell the whole story. The kinds of pressures brought to bear on Matera, and the 'ethnic' and 'soccer-as-a-kid' factors mentioned by Lewis seem to be more adequate explanations. Goodes' mother's innocuously framed suggestion obscures a massive cultural pressure: Australian Rules has more symbolic power in the communities, therefore grown men play Australian Rules; they do not belong in soccer, a game for 'ethnics' and kids.

It is not within Gorman's ambit to discuss the complex mechanics of such code shifts. Nonetheless, his failure to draw out the cultural pressure imparted on Aboriginal men to live up to certain sporting expectations from both outside and within their communities allows the rhetoric of nature and inevitability to override the specific dynamics of any given individual's story.

By contrast, sports journalist Christian Nicolussi manages better to locate the nuances of Aboriginal rugby league footballer, Preston Campbell's shift from soccer in one slight article in the *Daily Telegraph*. Nicolussi claims that when Campbell was young, he 'only played league occasionally. Soccer was his main passion.' Campbell is quoted as saying:

I used to play with my cousin (and former NRL star) Nathan Blacklock. He used to play soccer in the morning and league in the afternoon. He ended up playing league only and when I was left on my own, I was left with no option but to follow him.

Campbell's 'absence of option' is a phrase that perfectly captures the fundamental breach in the relationship between young Indigenous players and Australian soccer hierarchies. Whether through an absence of pathways and support from soccer authorities, an absence of familial support, or broader cultural pressures that

push or pull them away from soccer, young Indigenous players face near overwhelming obstacles in their struggle to make the grade.

Contemporary Indigenous A-League star David Williams believes the financial, cultural and life rewards are immense for Aboriginal players who break through. Soccer's international profile is an important difference. The game can take Indigenous players to parts of the world unimagined by those who play the dominant codes in Australia. Perkins, Briscoe and Moriarty showed at an earlier time how travel to Europe could also expand and sometimes radicalise their worldviews while giving them a chance to show pride in and educate others about their Aboriginality.

The eight or more Indigenous Matildas have illuminated a generation of their contemporaries a realistic professional sports pathway.

Yet there is something amiss in our narrative. How is it that soccer can get Harry Williams to the pinnacle of world sport via the 1974 World Cup without this moment creating an expansion in Indigenous participation in the game? Ultimately, this is a story about a failure in communication between the generations. In the battle for the hearts and minds of Aboriginal sportsmen and women, Australian soccer's silence and failure to follow through on what can only be described as wonderful moments in Aboriginal participation in and commitment to the game is nothing short of criminal irresponsibility to its own wellbeing and belonging.

There is hope for the future in the work being done in a number of programs around the country. But as I look I don't see much in the way of pathways – never mind dreaming tracks. Sometimes the locations of Indigenous participation seem as remote and disconnected from the central narratives of Australian soccer as the stories of Quilp and 'Bondi' Neal over 100 years ago.



TRICKLE DOWN COACHING: THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL CURRICULUM

KATE COHEN

WHENEVER I SPEAK TO A COACH, I TRY TO ASK FOR THEIR OPINION on Football Federation Australia's National Football Curriculum (NFC). I want to know what parts they agree and disagree with, what parts they understand and what parts are unclear. What becomes apparent is that the NFC – intended to be a unifying document from which all coaches in Australia work – still has many obstacles to overcome before its ambitions and objectives are fully realised.

Once the debate moves beyond the NFC's mandating of the Dutch 1-4-3-3 as the formation of choice, it inevitably arrives on a debate over the two contrasting approaches to developing young footballers. The two basic and contrasting approaches to football coaching are the 'Isolated' approach and the 'Holistic' approach. The NFC advocates the Holistic approach as the 'best choice' for developing the next generation of Australian footballers. Yet despite the work put into realising this belief, there are still many roadblocks to be overcome before the Holistic approach to youth

development comes to fruition at all levels of football in Australia. There is a misunderstanding as to what the Holistic approach to coaching actually means, what it entails and whether it is actually the most effective way to develop young footballers. There is also a lack of funding and an imperfect football hierarchy which makes FFA's attempts to implement their vision more difficult.

In order to understand the divide, it is important to understand what the two different approaches are and where they have been developed from. The traditional Isolated approach to coaching is based on the view that technique underpins every action in football and without sound technique, the player cannot be successful. In order to improve technique, the Isolated approach involves direct instruction from the coach as well as isolating a specific technique, breaking that technique down into smaller components and mastering it through repetition before being able to apply it in a game situation. The example of the Isolated approach used in the NFC is of a coach instructing players to slalom through cones in order to improve their close control and dribbling ability. This approach can also be characterised by what Michael Metzler, in his book *Instructional Models for Physical Education*, states is 'teacher saying' and the 'student doing'. A typical Isolated session will involve a technique-related warm up and a series of progressions on that technique before a game at the end where the practiced technique is then applied.

Because football involves technical, tactical, mental and physical components, the Holistic approach works on the core principle that technique cannot be isolated from its overall context. Therefore, instead of isolating a technique and improving it through a series of repetitive drills, technique is improved by playing a series of small-sided or modified games. The two core components of the Holistic approach are the use of these modified games, known as games-based training, and an emphasis on questioning as a form of communication for coaches.

This approach to coaching is not new. In fact it is an approach which has been developed in Australia. The first component of the Holistic approach – games-based training – was first proposed in 1982 by Rod Thorpe and David Bunker who referred to their concept as ‘Teaching Games for Understanding’ (TGfU). During their research, published in the *Bulletin of Physical Education*, Thorpe and Bunker observed a range of coaching approaches used during physical education classes. They found that sessions which involved the traditional, Isolated approach – that is the coach isolating a specific technique and getting the students to repeatedly practice it – took up the majority of the coaching session and left little time for game play at the end.

Thorpe and Bunker asked coaches what their major frustration was with this Isolated approach to coaching. Overwhelmingly, the coaches responded by saying that isolated technique practice is ineffective. Despite constantly and laboriously repeating a specific technique in an isolated manner, that technique would then break down in a match situation where pressure and resistances were applied.

Once their research was complete, Thorpe and Bunker addressed this problem by developing the TGfU coaching model which worked on the principle that game play should be at the centre of each session. This TGfU model was improved upon when Thorpe, who had developed the initial model with Bunker in 1982, joined forces with the Australian Sports Commission and various Australian sports coaches in the mid-1990s. With some adjustments and progressions made to the games-based model, the improved version became known as the ‘Game Sense’ or Holistic approach, which was more relevant to sports coaches as opposed to physical education teachers. The change of name was similarly done to differentiate and distance the new approach from the TGfU model, but crucially, the games-based philosophy remained central.

Emphasis on questioning as a communication tool for coaches was a crucial addition. FFA’s NFC and advanced coach education courses similarly emphasise this, encouraging coaches

to intervene in a session to provide feedback and ‘guide players towards improved skill performance’ by ‘[asking] questions to stimulate and engage players.’ By definition, guided discovery is described by Muska Mosston and Sara Aston, in their 2002 book *Teaching Physical Education*, as ‘the logical and sequential design of questions that lead a person to discover a target concept.’

The following is one example of this type of questioning, as stated in the Football Coaching Process document:

So, our task is to get a back four player into the middle third in possession: what would have been a better pass to help make that happen?

This emphasis on questioning encourages a player to think and talk about the technical and tactical aspects of play and allows them to be involved in the process of learning. It also allows the coach to gain insight into what the player was thinking at the time, therefore allowing them to influence the player’s future thinking. It is in stark contrast to the Isolated approach which involves a traditional, ‘direct instruction’ take on communication, such as a coach telling a player ‘you should have passed here, not there.’

‘To develop players’ active involvement in the training and learning process, coaches must master the skill of posing questions,’ writes respected youth coach Horst Wein in his book *Developing Youth Football Players* which is an official coach education textbook for both the Spanish Football Federation and FFA. ‘The most effective questions are open-ended ones that require descriptive answers... through systematic questioning by the coach, the players are self-generating the information.’

Wein, who has also consulted the German, English and Spanish federations, believes that in order to develop the best, most well-rounded players, technique cannot and should not be isolated from its football context. Along with his advocacy for the use of

questioning, Wein states that a session should be based around a series of modified games. ‘To develop their innate potential, players must be exposed daily to a progressive training program with simplified games,’ writes Wein. ‘These games are an ideal tool to not only develop game intelligence in any player but also to hone technical and tactical skills.’

PERCEPTION, DECISION MAKING AND EXECUTION

Tim Cahill’s wonder-goal against the Netherlands at the 2014 World Cup is one that will live long in the memory of Australian football fans. After controlling play for the opening 19 minutes, frustrating their heavily favoured Dutch opponents, Australia fell behind when Arjen Robben capitalised on an error at the back. Barely a minute later, the despondent Aussie fans were jubilant and perhaps disbelieving. Ryan McGowan’s lofted cross from all of 40 metres out seemed to hang in the air for an eternity. Australia’s star man Cahill had pulled away to the back post, as he so often does, and timed his left foot volley to perfection. From a difficult angle, on his weaker foot, with the ball coming across his body and from a height, the ball rocketed off the middle of Cahill’s laces, past the helpless goalkeeper Jasper Cillessen before smacking the underside of the cross bar and bouncing over the line. Arguably Australia’s greatest ever goal involved only three steps: perception, decision making and execution.

As with any action in football, whether it be a near impossible shot at goal or a simple five metre pass, the ‘perception-decision making-execution’ chain is constantly involved. As the ball was in the air, Cahill eyed up and assessed his surroundings, taking in a series of cues that dictated what he would do next. Where am I on the pitch? Where is the ball coming from? Where is my marker? Where is the goal? Within a split second, after assessing and perceiving the options available to him, Cahill’s next step was

to make a decision. Should I bring the ball under control with my chest? Or reach up with my left foot? Or wait for the ball to drop and volley it towards goal first time? Then came the execution: a perfectly struck left foot volley.

Cahill would surely never have practiced such a difficult technique – volleying the ball towards goal with his weaker left foot after a high cross from 40 metres out – in isolation. However, because the ‘perception-decision making-execution’ chain had been honed and fired over years of training, Cahill was able to score one of the best goals of his career.

This ‘perception-decision making-execution’ chain is where one of the major criticisms of the Isolated approach lies. During isolated technical training, only the ‘execution’ element of the chain is being practiced. And because the ‘perception’ and ‘decision making’ components are being neglected at the expense of the execution of the technique, the player lacks the necessary tools to translate their newly acquired technique into a game situation, where pressure and resistances are applied.

‘When you analyse football and break it down into its most basic form, football is about scoring goals. There are two teams and the team that scores the most goals wins,’ outgoing Assistant National Technical Director Kelly Cross told *Leopold Method*. ‘As you then break it down further, sometimes you have the ball, sometimes you don’t and there are transition moments in between the two. These are the objective facts about football and as you go down through all the key principles [of the four main moments], team tasks and player tasks for what you are trying to achieve, you fundamentally get down to the bottom and that is the “player actions”. The entire game of football rests on “player actions”.

‘When you analyse any action in football, what’s the first thing that has to happen before a player does something? That something has to come from the brain. I don’t think we get into the brain enough in training. In a lot of training sessions I see, the brain might as well be switched off. But football starts with the brain. If player actions come from the brain, then the process is

that the player has to perceive something, process the information, make a decision and then perform the action. This chain is the essence of coaching which is why the Holistic approach makes sense.’

The purpose of training is to create short term improvements for upcoming matches, and/or longer term improvements to develop players who are able to perform well in matches in the future. FFA’s Football Coaching Process document outlines that well executed games-based training allows the coach to improve ‘how the player perceives football situations, what football action the player decides to perform and the quality of the football action the player executes.’

By creating a game-like training environment for players and putting them in a position where the ‘perception-decision making-execution’ chain is constantly being worked, a coach gives the players the structure to learn through experience. This type of learning and developing, with the football context intact, is vital considering 99% of all learning is non-conscious. The visual cues and game-realistic experiences that a player encounters during games-based training – for example where the defender is positioned or where there is space to execute a pass to a teammate – are vital in helping a young footballer develop. In his book *Brain-Based Learning*, Eric Jensen states that ‘simply absorbing an experience is invaluable to the learning process as the brain expands its perceptual maps.’ By making those training experiences relevant to the game, players are able to develop the necessary tools to be successful in the match.

A study by Marco Aguiar, Goreti Botelho, Carlos Lago, Victor Maças and Jaime Sampaio found that the Holistic and Game Sense approach achieves better learning outcomes when players are exposed to a training environment that is similar to the demands found in a competitive match situation. Also, research by David Kirk and Ann McPhail from Loughborough University has shown

that players who trained using the Holistic approach score better in tests of tactical knowledge when compared to players who trained in an Isolated approach. But perhaps the most important finding from Stephen Harvey, from Leeds Metropolitan University, demonstrated that children find games-based training to be more enjoyable than isolated skill drills.

‘I’ve done a lot of research and also read a lot of research in this area and there’s no doubting that the Holistic approach results in better performances and development at whatever level you look at,’ Professor Richard Light of Federation University Australia told *Leopold Method*.

‘A big problem with it is that [the Holistic approach] is such a pedagogical challenge for coaches,’ said Light, who has written extensively on the Game Sense and Holistic approach to coaching. ‘The two big problems for coaches are, firstly, in designing and managing the games to ensure the most effective learning, and also the most enjoyable learning, takes place. The other problem involves questioning, which is quite foreign for coaches who have been brought up on being ostensibly in charge, telling the players what to do and being the fount of all knowledge. With those two challenges, you need to have some strategies in place to address them.’

In a 2002 research paper, an empirical analysis of the experiences of professional coaches or coach educators in Victoria, Light was able to outline the benefits and challenges of implementing the Holistic approach. By using a games-based approach and using questioning, the coaches interviewed found they were able to better improve the ‘off the ball’ components of the match, including decision making and the timing and direction of runs. There was also greater transfer of progress from training to the game, a better learning environment to allow for the creation of independent players, and that the players were more motivated during training.

The first challenge outlined was that the approach required

a significant change in the perception of what a coach's role should be. The change in approach requires a coach to accept that their role is to be a learning facilitator – someone who creates an environment that allows a player to learn themselves. Of course, this goes against what Light stated was the traditional role of a coach of being 'in charge'.

The second challenge was that games-based training was at odds with an outsiders view of what effective training 'should' look like. 'As Gary [a participant in the study] argues, standing players in neat lines running along predetermined lines and drilling a particular passing technique may look good to the club administration or parents of junior players but does not lead to better performance in games,' wrote Light.

The final challenge was time constraints. Whereas direct instruction from the coach results in an immediate improvement, questioning may result in a number of mistakes before the player is able to solve the football problem they face. In Light's study, Lance, a coach with 30 years of experience, stated, '[if] you are not giving specific instructions and often don't get an immediate improvement that is visible, and easily recognisable to parents. But it's the case of "I cannot teach you, I can only help you learn."'

In order to overcome the challenges Light outlined there needs to be a shift in mentality of the coach's role, as well as clear communication of what the Holistic approach entails. But creating clear lines of communication and rolling out effective coach and parent education is a difficult task.

Light says that similar challenges are faced in implementing the Holistic approach in rugby union in England. 'One of the chapters in my upcoming book is on the Rugby Football Union in England and how they've taken up the Holistic approach to inform all of their coaching,' said Light. 'Our study found that, to start with, there is a good understanding of what the Holistic approach is. But then as it goes down the ranks, that understanding changes and by the time it gets to the bottom, nobody knows what they're doing, it's full of contradictions and no one is convinced that the

Holistic approach is the best way to coach.’ This lack of top down knowledge transfer could be said to be the case with FFA’s attempts to widely implement the Holistic approach in Australian football.

MISUNDERSTANDING AND MISCOMMUNICATION

The Holistic approach was developed in Australia in the mid-1990s, but it still isn’t universally used by football coaches. The introduction of the first NFC in 2009 was intended to be a unifying document which outlined the ‘philosophical approach’ for Australian football. One of the five guiding principles of the NFC was to ‘[use] a practical “total football” approach.’ As part of this ‘total football’ approach, Australia would have a ‘proactive style of play’, a ‘uniform system of play’ (the 1-4-3-3 formation) and ‘an emphasis on technique’.

The two final points which fell under move towards a ‘total football’ approach was that a ‘game-related approach [would be used] as the major focus of training’ and that there would be ‘a “guided discovery” approach in player and coach development’. These two elements are what defines the Holistic approach, but nowhere in the first edition of the NFC was this approach explicitly stated or defined.

The NFC stated that ‘the essence of teaching (training) is to always think of the actual game situation as the starting point and then simplify/modify the game situation for training. This is achieved by reducing the game-specific resistances until the training aim can be realised by the players.’ Yet for someone unfamiliar with this philosophy, it would be difficult to implement the Holistic approach coaching style on the basis of a few phrases buried in a 44-page document, especially when the term ‘Holistic approach’ isn’t used once.

Former National Technical Director Han Berger is the man responsible for both NFCs. Three years after the first NFC was

released, Berger admitted during a 2012 Football Queensland conference that ‘there are all kinds of perceptions and ideas about the NFC and the conclusion is it’s not really clear.’

This was reaffirmed in an interview with Fox Sports commentator Simon Hill in July 2012. ‘I assumed certain knowledge levels and understanding when writing the curriculum,’ he told Hill. ‘The first version was about the philosophical approach, but some haven’t been able to grasp it. Others understand, but aren’t keen to implement it. Last time I presumed that if they understood the philosophies, the coaches themselves would be able to design the drills.’

‘What Han [Berger] thought was “it all makes sense, we’re going to have a network of people out there to spread it so off we go,”’ Cross told *Leopold Method* on the first edition of the NFC. ‘There were assumptions made about how the system worked, how the network worked. But it’s not Holland.’

‘One thing was the delivery and implementation of the first NFC, but also the nature of the first NFC. Even though we had the first NFC and brought out the Building Blocks document, we needed a bit more detail. It needed exercises. Instead of assuming people could take the theoretical and hypothetical content of the first edition and turn that into exercises, we needed to give them some.’

‘We’ve said, and Han has said, the first NFC wasn’t good enough. It was too high level. The first part of it was good – it identified the gaps and weaknesses in Australia and it outlined a logical structure to fix them and there are a few parts that would make sense if you took the time to read it and digest it. But then we found out, in the effort to implement it, the challenges we were having was because it wasn’t clear enough.’

Just as there was no definition or practical examples of what the Holistic approach entails, there was no definition or clarity about the Isolated approach to coaching. It was said that ‘by

isolating parts from this total context they lose their significance,’ which former Australian Institute of Sports head coach Ron Smith believes created a misconception about where isolated practice fits into the development of junior footballers.

‘I think the message about isolated practice and where it fits within in the development process of players has been misleading from FFA,’ Smith told *Leopold Method*. ‘What they tried to say is that isolated practice isn’t a good way of developing a player’s decision making, and we all agree with that, but to say that isolated practice per se is not wanted or not of value is not the right message. It’s kind of been portrayed as being bad for players to practice in isolation, but it hasn’t been explained in the context of developing players overall.’

This was another example of how poor or insufficient top-down communication hindered FFA’s attempts to roll out a new philosophy to coaching. Frustrated with the speed of progress, Berger and FFA released an updated version of the NFC four years later in 2013.

This 300-page updated NFC, coupled with Kelly Cross’ 285-page *The Football Coaching Process* (FCP) document, create a comprehensive guide to how footballers should be developed. Unlike the first edition, the Holistic approach is explicitly defined and explained in the second NFC where there are over seven pages of argumentation and analogies as to why this approach is the most effective. There is also over 200 pages of model sessions to assist coaches of any age group use the Holistic approach.

Unlike the first edition of the NFC, which, according to Smith created a misconception that isolated practice was ‘not wanted or not of value’, the FCP document clarified and outlined the role of isolated practice and when it should be used.

‘However, this is not to say that there is absolutely no place for isolated training,’ says the FCP on page 68:

In specific circumstances, for a specific player, when the coach has exhausted all holistic means to improve him, the only remaining solution is for the player to work individually on 'technique'. Isolated exercises should be the last resort for certain players, when necessary, not the fundamental basis of training for all players... It is FFA's belief that this kind of isolated, remedial work is best utilized as 'homework': in fact, all players should clock up a large number of hours mastering the ball at home, for example, using a wall to help develop passing and receiving technique, or trying out 1v1 moves in the back yard.

Despite the clarity and detail contained in the second NFC and the FCP document, there has still been challenges in getting those messages to filter down to the grassroots. It would be unrealistic to expect mum or dad, who volunteer to coach their child's under-6s side, to flick through 585 pages of information, regardless of whether that information is extremely valuable and helpful to them.

'The challenge is, a kid comes into one of those [grassroots] clubs and their coach is someone who doesn't want to coach but no one else does either,' said Cross. 'They haven't been on a coaching course and this club doesn't have someone working fulltime to help, so maybe they'll go on the internet and if they're lucky enough they'll find [the NFC].'

Cross's analogy about the realities of grassroots football is one that resonates with many involved at the bottom of the pyramid. In order to alter this current reality, to improve the quality of coaching and to lift the standard of the overall football experience at the grassroots, there are many challenges that FFA needs to overcome. Making this more difficult is the lack of funding and resources and an imperfect football hierarchy. 'We need to arrive at a point where everyone can arrive at a football field and get the right training,' said Cross. 'We're a long way off that.'

‘If you want to change practices, whether in teaching or coaching, you have to commit. You have to commit funds and you have to commit effort and bodies,’ said Light. The roadblocks in the path of FFA realising the best practices in coaching youth footballers implemented from top to bottom invariably come back to resources. Put simply, there is not enough funding and not enough people on the ground to spread the message, knowledge and expertise.

These are challenges that will take time to overcome, especially in the absence of increased financial resources. FFA have corrected and greatly improved the issue of clarity that was present in the first edition of the NFC. The 2013 updated edition, coupled with the FCP document provides a comprehensive resource for the coaches who can find and access it. But there needs to be a well-defined pathway for this information to trickle down to ensure it reaches the mums and dads coaching their child during their first organised football experiences at grassroots level.

‘We have the NFC, we [FFA] believe in it, world academics believe in it,’ said Cross. ‘But we have something up here on level 22 at FFA offices and, as with anything, I’m not sure if it’s resistance, but more resources. The roll out of the NFC would be more successful if the game was more integrated. Currently it’s not as streamlined as it could be and we don’t have enough people on the ground.

‘It’s almost as if we’ve got the software up here at FFA but we need to get the hardware to work and make sure the connections between the parts in the system work. If the resources stay the same, this is going to take a while. To take a quantum leap we need to improve resources and have more people on the ground.

‘We’re not Germany, we can’t just put 200 new people on fulltime as they did when they wanted to improve youth development. But it’s no good us complaining about what we don’t have. We need to work smarter.

‘Is there ever going to be a point in time where we get to the stage that every under-6 joins a club and gets the right training? That’s the aim but I think there’s too many variables and too many

issues to put a time on [achieving] it. The movement towards and the acceptance of the Holistic approach shows that there's progress. You'd like to think you could click your fingers and everyone is doing it but the reality is it's going to take time because we don't have the resources.'

CONTRIBUTORS

SHAUN MOONEY – PUBLISHER

Shaun is the publisher of *Leopold Method*, and has contributed to the *Guardian Australia*.

Shaun writes features on the business of football, grassroots issues and player development. He interprets the ‘cause and effects’ to provide an alternative approach to the discourse.

Previously, Shaun wrote articles for retail and small business marketing, which were syndicated across six countries. He has also co-authored two business books, and along with his fellow author was described by *Australian Financial Review* as ‘marketing gurus’.

JOE GORMAN – EDITOR

Joe is the editor for *Leopold Method*. He writes regularly for the *Guardian Australia*, and has been published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Roads and Kingdoms*, *New Matilda*, *Overland Literary Journal* and *The Roar*.

KATE COHEN

Kate is a freelance football writer who writes for *Leopold Method*. Whereas football writing commonly tell the reader the ‘who’, ‘what’ and ‘when’ of a match, Kate endeavours to explain to the reader the ‘why’ and the ‘how’.

LEOPOLD METHOD

Since writing for *Leopold Method*, Kate has quickly become one of the best young football writers in the country, winning the FFDU Young Football Writer of the Year in 2013. Her work has also featured for the *Guardian Australia*, the official Liverpool FC website as well as *FourFourTwo Australia*. In 2014, Kate was awarded as Digital Football Writer of the Year in the FFDU Awards.

ROY HAY

Roy Hay is joint author with Bill Murray of *A History of Football in Australia: A Game of Two Halves*, and joint editor of *The World Game Downunder*. With Ian Syson, he wrote *The Story of Football in Victoria* for Football Federation Victoria in 2009. He also wrote *James ‘Dun’ Hay: The Story of A Footballer, 1881–1940*, and many academic articles on the game in Australia and overseas. He taught at Deakin University for 25 years and has been a part-time journalist. He is a member of FFA’s panel of historians and of FFV’s History Committee.

IAN SYSON

Ian is a senior lecturer in literary studies and professional writing at Victoria University and he runs the *Vulgar Press*, an independent Melbourne publishing company. Despite this he is also a football historian interested in the deep dark histories of the football codes (particularly association football) in Australia. In Ian’s mind, if it happened after the Second World War it’s too fresh in the memory to bother with.

VINCE RUGARI

Vince is a writer for *Leopold Method*. Currently a sports reporter for *The Cairns Post*, he is the former sports editor of *The Area News* in Griffith, NSW, one of Australian football’s most passionate regional outposts, and is the former Gold Coast/Brisbane correspondent for *Sportal*. A regular columnist for *The Roar*, he has also been

published by *Guardian Australia*, *The World Game*, *AAP*, *Goal Australia* and more.

The round ball game has always been Vince's master, but these days, his curiosity extends beyond the mainstream, in the areas where it is yet to take complete hold.

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